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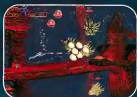
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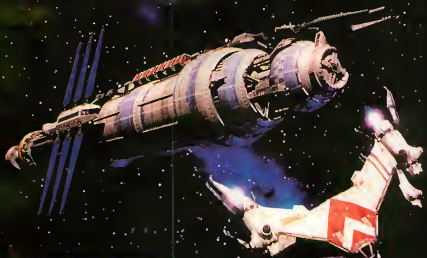
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COVER: A starship continues its voyage of exploration. Art by George Krutner. ABOVE: Kurt Russell, reprising his role as Snake Plissken in John Carpenter's *Escape From L.A.*, asks for directions from a wary Steve Buscemi, playing film weasel Map-to-the-Stars Eddie.

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Looking back to a glorious future.

SCIENCE FICTION IS IN THE BUSINESS of big numbers. Events in the past and millennia in the future are its stock in trade. So you might be surprised to learn that under certain circumstances, a period of time as short as four years can seem remarkably long.

The issue of *Science Fiction Age* you are currently holding caps off our fourth year of publication, and those four years seem like an infinity when compared with the average run of most new science fiction magazines of the past few decades. Many magazines manage to put out a first issue, and then vanish under the stress of continued publication. Still others have lasted a year or two, only then to be rejected by the marketplace. There are even those that announce imminent publication with great fanfare, and then withdraw from the playing field without ever presenting their premiere issue.

So it is with great pride that we here at *Science Fiction Age* put before you our 24th bi-monthly issue. You've honored us with Nebula and Hugo nominations, a Nebula Award, and continued love on a heavily competitive newsstand. Which makes this a good time to look back on how we've changed and grown over the past four years, in our constant struggle to create the best SF magazine in the universe.

Each issue, we've given you more and better fiction. You asked for more stories, and so we have, issue by issue, increased the percentage of pages devoted to fiction. Many of you also wrote us over the years to ask for longer stories, and we responded by adding a stand-alone novella insert in each issue. We're going to continue seeking out these rare and difficult stories, as with this issue's major work by the ungaraged Robert Silverberg.

We widened our non-fiction focus in response to those of you who want us to cover other topics of interest to SF fans, such as the Internet, music, limited edition collectibles, trading cards, and model kits. Our Alternative Media section presents these myriad SF sub-genres in a way that is both informative and visually exciting.

Based on your letters and survey responses, we've de-emphasized those aspects of the magazine that just didn't bowl you over, and beefed up those that left you hungry for more.

We've increased our staff in order to better

serve you. The Sovereign Media offices have moved twice to larger digs since our inception to house the staff that handles the business of producing the finest genre magazines around. We're doing all we can to satisfy you.

But at the same time, however — Nobody's perfect. As we move forward into this *Science Fiction Age*, we also move forward into science fiction problems of which our parents (and earlier publishers) never even dreamed. Last issue, once copies were already in the hands of subscribers and gracing the newsstands, it was noticed that the final word of Stephen Baxter's superb triptych, "The Saddle Point Sequence," was dropped. (What's worst of all is that it was the editor's mother who noticed it first.) And it was a good word too, for we were besieged with phone calls, letters, faxes, and e-mail demanding to know just what had happened.

What happened was a situation that Gutenberg could not have comprehended. The galleys of that piece were read many times by many eyes. (I, alone, personally read it at least four times after it was typeset, which was in addition to the many times I read it in manuscript form before deciding to purchase it for your pleasure.) But unlike the "old" days, when manually pasted-up boards were shipped to the printer to be made into film, in this wonderful new world of the future, all of that has been replaced by a computer disk containing files filled with text and pictures, all of the editorial, and all of the ads. Something strange happened somewhere deep in the electronic heart of that disk, and by the time the bytes were turned into actual letters, a sentence at the top of the final column was duplicated, pushing the final word of the story off the page.

Spookily, like something out of *The X-Files*, a re-examination of that disk showed that all was still as it was supposed to be. We're still trying to figure out just what went wrong, but, meanwhile, this is the way the final paragraph should have read:

When I climbed out of the Sanger's cockpit, Florida sunlight enveloped me, like fusion summer.

We're sorry you had to wait sixty days to find that out. We promise to do our best to make sure that something like this never happens again. You've enjoyed the past four years. Stick around for a even brighter future.

Scott Edelman

SCIENCE FICTION AGE

VOLUME 4

NUMBER 6

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Dear Editor:

Once again I pick up your magazine, turn to the Letters page, and read some self-declared last bastion of good taste proclaim everyone else "criminally ignorant dilettantes" (May 1995). Strong words. I've seen it in this magazine more than once and I feel I have to speak up for the unwashed masses. I consider myself a hard core science fiction fan. I've been reading sci-fi in one form or another since I can remember, and I haven't got the slightest idea who Horace Gold or Richard Powers might be. I don't care, either. The thing that has always drawn me to the science fiction genre is the great tolerance that people in this field exhibit. Authors have always preached human rights and equality. *Star Trek* had one of the first multiethnic casts, people working side by side with no regard for race or color. It's a shame when fans don't learn from that lesson, and even worse when your magazine prints an insulting letter like Mr. Donnelly's. I personally don't care that much for *Star Trek* myself, but I find Mr. Donnelly's comments offensive and self-righteous. We all have one thing we agree on — we love science fiction. I don't care if you don't like my favorite authors or television shows, but don't call me ignorant because I don't agree with you.

Some time ago someone wrote in knocking *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* and other non-legitimate forms of science fiction. When I was young my introduction to science fiction was comic books and Godzilla movies. From there I went on to Robert Heinlein's *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel*. Fans can always discover the classics (that's part of the fun), but I'm for anything that draws people to SF.

Please think before writing a narrow-minded letter that insults and possibly hurts someone. As Paul Westerberg sings, "Stop knockin' on mine."

Brian Glass

Dear Scott:

I have always viewed the stories in *SF Age* as more competent than inspired. Well, not like the stuff I was reading in the late '40s Golden Age, anyway. Now that was not enough to keep me from resubscribing for two more years; it is still the best SF periodical around.

But getting to the May issue where there were two really outstanding stories: "Columbiad," a brilliant recreation of times gone by, and "On the Golconda Run." This last had solid substance, was really excellent writing, and a mystery for myself as a person not normally interested in mysteries. Literally, I'm not. What constitutes good writing for

me? I guess anything that produces a reaction in me to say, "Gee, that's good writing!" The writing is clear; it gives you a feeling of immediacy, like you were there; a use of the language that denotes love for words, and an ability to use them well.

I hope I've made myself clear and am not scuzzmoozing to no end. Just that it takes a pretty tremendous story to get me to write a fan letter.

Jim Goldfrank

Dear Sirs:

I was very impressed with the conversation from the May 1995 issue of *Science Fiction Age* between Arian Andrews and Geoffrey A. Landis regarding global warming. Whether the confrontation that ensued was happenstance or contrived matters little. It was informative, enlightening, and entertaining, as such discussions should be.

The interview/discussion section of the magazine I've always found to be one of the high marks in *Science Fiction Age*. But more often than not, they came across as a "friendly chat-around the fireplace amongst friends who are careful not to antagonize one another." A difference of opinion certainly has cropped up in previous conversations, but the give-and-take in the discussion I am referring to was particularly sharp, due to the intelligence of all parties involved.

Conversation need not be so passive, and I would encourage the idea of a more confrontational style, à la Crossfire, to find its way as a format on future interviews (not as a replacement of, but as an addendum to your present style). Problem is, for this to be effective requires the participants to be equally skilled and knowledgeable, otherwise the impression of being "beaten up" intellectually results in an "Us-vs.-Them" mentality, and quality is sacrificed.

Reid Babbitt

Dear Sirs:

In reference to your Science Forum article, "Is the threat of global warming politics as usual or a true environmental menace?" by Arian Andrews, Sr. and Geoffrey A. Landis, I would like to say that whether we melt the ice caps or create a new Ice Age, we, as a race, are definitely fouling our nest. It's not the little guy driving his car or burning his fireplace who's doing the damage, it's the big money corporations in their relentless quest for the almighty buck. When are people going to realize that fossil fuels and petrochemicals are not part of this ecology? The present ecology has no way to deal with the carbon dioxide from burning dead dinosaurs. The cause

of their demise after ruling this planet for millions of years is only speculation at this point, so don't you think it would be better to leave them buried?

There is an agricultural product that not only will provide a renewable energy source, it can also give us pulp for paper, fiber for textiles, a food source better than soy, and natural medicines that have been proven effective for thousands of years. The beauty of this plant is that it can be grown almost anywhere, sometimes up to three crops a season, it does not deplete the soil, and the carbon dioxide produced from burning it is re-absorbed by the next crop, leaving the air nice and clean. The only problem is that this plant is illegal to grow. That's right, I'm talking about Cannabis Hemp, commonly known as Marijuana.

The only people who would be hurt by legalizing hemp are those who are destroying this planet for their own gain, the petrochemical industry, pharmaceutical companies, textiles, and lumber and paper pulp interests. They could not stand up to the competition posed by the hemp industry, so by imposing a smear campaign in the media and by very effective lobbying against Marijuana in 1937, they managed to make it illegal.

The diesel engine was originally designed to run on hemp seed oil. Canvas sails were made of hemp fiber for centuries, not to mention rope. Hemp paper is far superior to wood pulp paper and it is more ecologically sound. If Cannabis Hemp were not made illegal, the rain forests would be standing today.

The medicinal uses of this plant are myriad! We all know how it helps people suffering with glaucoma, those undergoing chemotherapy and AIDS treatment, but it is also an analgesic, an anti-inflammatory, an anti-viral (I have seen it stop a herpes lesion cold with my own eyes!), just to name a few. It has been used in Chinese medicine since 2800 B.C. without any ill effects!

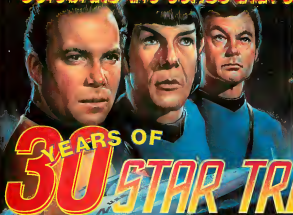
We, as a people, should ask the big money corporations: How much money is enough? For every ecologically destructive industry that is put to a stop, there will be jobs and money to be made in a hemp industry. Cannabis Hemp is not just marijuana! So let's get real and start asking our government for an accounting of the destruction they are allowing by supporting these greedy companies.

Ronald D. Thurman

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, P. O. Box 369, Damascus, MD 20872, or e-mail to S. Edelman.1@Gencis.Gencis.Com, or use CompuServe address: 102745,2004

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Tepper's latest will likely top this year's Tiptree Award contenders.



Sheri Tepper's newest novel is a literary chameleon, mixing poetry and politics. Art by Stuart Bodek.

POST-GERNSBACK SF HAS ALWAYS FEATURED THE occasional polemical novel, fiction intended to argue a particular point of view with real-world consequences. Arguably the first such novel was Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* (1959). In this book Heinlein managed to marry his particular brand of libertarian views with a thrilling story, thus establishing a model (as he did in so many other areas) for the fusion of social criticism and engaging futuristic narrative.

Further examples of spoiling-for-a-fight SF — stories that tried to infuse partisan doctrines into speculative story lines, to engender hot-headed, passionate argumentation, to educate the public and ameliorate social ills — can be counted almost on the fingers of one hand. After *Starship Troopers* came Norman Spinrad's *Bug Jack Barron* (1969) and *The Iron Dream* (1972). (Spinrad, of course, remains SF's pre-eminent polemicist.) John Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* (1972) was a neglected successor to his less didactic but equally engaged *Stand on Zanzibar* (1968).

Journa Russ's *The Female Man* (1975) most famously mounted the soapbox shortly thereafter, and from the same decade one might tentatively include Samuel Delany's *Triton* (1976). On the other end of the political spectrum, the team of Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle saw fit to insert monitory lectures into many of their collaborations, perhaps most centrally in *Oath of Fealty* (1981).

Despite their perhaps period-bound concerns, these novels all seem to have a way of enduring, entering the SF canon and continuing to provoke discussion decades after their debuts. Now appears a new candidate for this exclusive club. It comes from Sheri Tepper, a writer noted for her feminist concerns, and goes by the rather unfortunately

awkward (yet, as it will prove, fairly apt) title *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* (Bantam, \$22.95, hardcover, 416 pages).

Although I embarked on my reading of this book fully in sympathy with most of Tepper's positions on social and cultural issues, I quickly found myself so swamped by her rather heavy-handed treatment that I was unable to become involved in the narrative itself — a flaw I fear might prove fatal to this novel.

Tepper's *Decline* starts out rather like a John Crowley fable, in both tone and subject, with a Prologue set in the year 1959. Here we are introduced to the youthful Carolyn Crespín, a bright young woman heading off to college with more than a little stifled rebellion in her bosom. Bound by the strictures of the Crespín clan — embodied in three harpy aunts explicitly identified with the mythic Norms — Carolyn finds herself primed for the horizon-expanding opportunities and freedoms of college and adulthood. There, she will meet, no bond with six other special women. Serendipitously dubbing themselves the Decline and Fall Club and vowing never to personally stumble or capitulate to the powers that be, these "seven sisters" find their activities centering on their most mysterious member, a woman of uncertain origins nicknamed Sophy.

However, just as the reader is preparing to settle down and get to really know these women — individuating seven characters is, after all, a large task for any writer — the Prologue ends after a mere seventeen pages, and the reader is catapulted into the main action set in the year 2000. This is the first example of the many stumbles, infelicities, incredulities, gaps, and omissions to be found in Tepper's book.

And all of the blunders stem from one simple fact: Tepper is on a holy mission from the Goddess, an Avenging Annie or Carry Nation bent on countering the forces of darkness; her primary goal with this book is to get her sacred message across, to castigate, teach, and lash with fire. Any storytelling is going to be incidental and dedicated to her larger goals. In the end, only Tepper's innate talents as a fabulist save her from complete narrative meltdown.

In any case, once Tepper moves into her rotting, fascist-dominated, turn-of-the-century world, she sets several interlocked plots in motion. The first is the maturation and assorted fates of the now-verging-on-elderly DFC members. Although Carolyn Crespín remains the central point of view, extensive attention is given to the other members as well. We learn that Sophy has apparently committed suicide after a long career as author and social activist, although her spirit literally remains behind to haunt and instruct her friends.

Concurrent with these developments is the shifting into high gear of a long-standing plot by a shadowy group named the Alliance to assert its domination over the world. A third thread is the show-trial of a young woman accused of killing her child, with lawyer Carolyn as her defender. Finally, as if these issues were not enough, at the halfway point in the novel, a worldwide "lilido-loss" plague that

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Poetry Contest \$24,000 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months

Owings Mills, Maryland — The National Library of Poetry has just announced that \$24,000 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in **ONLY ONE** original poem, any subject, any style to:

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The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "Each poem received will be acknowledged, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely. Every poet who enters will receive an evaluation of their artistry.



The Coming of Dawn, featured above, is one of The National Library of Poetry's recent deluxe hardbound anthologies.

World's Largest Poetry Organization

Having awarded over \$90,000 in prizes to over 5,000 poets worldwide in recent years, The National Library of Poetry, founded in 1982 to promote the artistic accomplishments of contemporary poets, is the largest organization of its kind in the world. Anthologies published by the organization have featured poems by more than 100,000 poets. "Our anthologies routinely sell out because they are truly enjoyable reading, and they are also a sought-after sourcebook for poetic talent," said Mr. Ely.

"We're always looking for new poetic talent," he added. "I hope you urge your readers to enter the contest. There is absolutely no obligation whatsoever, and they could be our next big winner."

readers men and women sterile and sexless is discovered to have snuck up and conquered humanity without anyone really spotting its approach. Plainly Tepper has laid out a veritable banquet of meaty topics and problems, and it is going to take some doing to draw all the threads together satisfactorily.

Tepper does manage to bind off everything in the end — although only by utilizing both a devil and a goddess or machine in a kind of C.S. Lewis/Charles Williams manner — but one senses that her heart is not really in the plot lines, except insofar as they allow her to dramatize the many injustices she perceives. What mostly preoccupies Tepper is drawing a damning portrait of centuries of male oppression: religious, cultural, and biological. So intent on this program is Tepper that she frequently will violate simple point-of-view conventions (the most jarring occurs in Chapter Eight, where a phone call that originates with Carolyn shifts without explanation at its end into the consciousness of DFC member Faye); will insert long monologues and a couple of omniscient summing-ups; and will simultaneously assert absolute verisimilitude and contradict it. This last flaw is the most unforgivable.

Tepper's future is supposed to represent an absolutely deterministic and believable extension of our current reality. Yet a mere four years from now prisons utilize hibernation tanks, fortress-style apartment blocks feature palm-reading "identity plates," women's colleges are subject to terrorist bombings, and clamps have been extinct in the wild for "decades." It seems unfair for an author to put her thumb on the scale in such a manner when trying to indict anyone for their crimes.

It also strains credulity that both Carolyn and one of the main Alliance Bad Guys, Jagger, just happen to live in New Mexico, not to mention that a secret colony of other pro-women players is also conveniently located in that state, enabling the reunited DFC to make a pilgrimage there.

A further failure of realism is Tepper's treatment of her worldwide plague. Although there are a few references to social upheavals and government responses, most people just seem to shrug and accept the literal shrinkage of their genitals and secondary sexual characteristics, and life continues pretty much as before.

Of course, if the plague had brought about the actual collapse of civilization, the show-trial that Tepper had laboriously set up could never have been brought to its moralistic, pedagogic conclusion.

In the end, this is a book which, for all its imbalances and flaws, takes chances and goes places few other SF novels dare tread. If the Tiptree Award is given solely on the basis of ideological bravado, then Tepper should win it. If literary merit is also a factor, then I myself would prefer to see a more artistically integrated novel take the prize.

Innervase, by John DeChascoe, Ace Nova, paperback, \$5.99, 249 pages.

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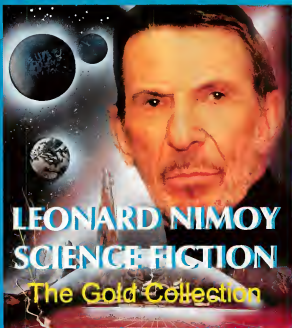
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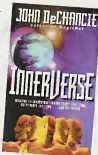
Innervase is set on a near-future Earth where the political and national boundaries are quite different from those of today. The world is dominated by the new economic powerhouse Great China. Catholic Mexico, under the control of the Mayan emperor Quetzal II, is asserting ancient land claims against what's left of the United States. (He's already recaptured New Mexico and now he's after Texas.) Worse, the entire Eastern United States, after a period of rioting and terrorist attacks, has suddenly gone silent, cutting off all contact with what's now called the Central United States after Congress relocates to Peoria.

This is Frank Sutter's world. As the book opens, he's an officer with the CUS Special Forces, charged with exterminating Mexican terrorist teams operating in Texas. The terrorists have given the citizens of the Central United States plenty of cause to hate them, but Frank knows that his own government isn't blameless on that front, nor can Frank ignore his own conscience forever.

The quote, "A million deaths is a statistic. One death is a tragedy," proves to be so. Frank is very good at what he does, but, try as he might, he's a basically decent man in an indecent situation, and one death too many finally convinces him of that. He applies for a transfer, and Special Forces comes up with a new assignment: to solve the riddle of the Republic of Innervase.

This is what the Eastern United States has become. There's still little contact with the outside world, no trade or exchange of ambassadors, but such information as CUS intelligence has been able to gather is astonishing: The Republic of Innervase has no standing army, no police and, as far as outsiders can tell, no government. Yet it runs, the population remains docile, manufacturing and food production continue, all without any visible means of organization. And yet, two whole divisions of CUS troops disappeared completely in Republic of Innervase territory, leaving their tanks and equipment untouched. The Republic of Innervase is a total enigma, and a potentially dangerous one.

Frank is the fourth agent to be sent into the republic; the first four disappeared as completely as the earlier troops, and from the beginning the mission goes awry. Frank's glider is damaged on takeoff, forcing a crash landing, and he's taken prisoner immediately. Not a very good start, to say the least. Badly injured, he's taken to a Repub-



lic of Innervase hospital where he's healed physically and, according to his doctor, "spiritually." He, like the rest of the population of the former Eastern United States, has been given a shot of "Innervase".

"I see. What's that?"

"A guide to correct behavior. Nothing more."

"And I don't have it?"

"Didn't have it. We corrected that."

I think any alert reader familiar with the situation as presented in the book will have

pretty much figured out how the population of the Republic of Innervase is being controlled, so I don't consider it a spoiler to reveal that "Innervase" is a nanotech mechanism for ensuring "correct behavior." More of a question is: Who's behind it, and why? Can they be stopped? An even more important question is, *Should* they be stopped?

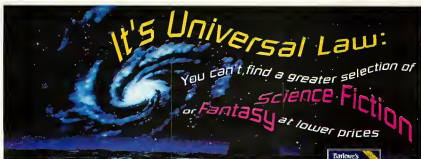
Even from the inside, Frank seems no closer to solving the riddle than before. There's still little in the way of control apparatus visible; when Frank experiences the effects of "Innervase" firsthand, he understands why little such control is needed. Another thing he does quickly discover is that the Republic of Innervase is not a utopia. Crime and environmental pollution may have been wiped out, but so has art, creativity, and passion of any kind. The infrastructure of the new republic is crumbling; Innervase has created a world of smiling robots, and Frank, unless he finds some answers soon, may be well on his way to becoming one of them.

Despite this, DeChance mostly avoids either didacticism or polemics, which in a way is a shame, because there are some fine lines and ambiguity available in this material that were worth exploring. From the beginning it was clear enough that the republic was a Bad Thing. Or, as Frank Sutter considers what good there is in the situation — and there is some — there's still never any doubt that, as he puts it, "... the price is too high." There's a little discussion of trade-offs, but it isn't really serious. It could have been, it would have been very easy

to make the Republic of Innervase a lot more attractive than it turned out to be, and then the price of admission might have been worth another look. I don't think that was because DeChance didn't see the potential; he just clearly wasn't interested.

That's fair. Such would have made *Innervase* a different sort of book. As it is, it's a very good action/adventure SF novel with an interest-





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ing—if familiar—McGuffin and, once a few mysteries are cleared away, a pretty darn nasty villain pulling the strings. As others have said, the best villains are those who think they're doing the right thing for the right reasons, and would you please stop squirming and take your medicine?? If that's true, then really first-rate villains don't have to be evil. They just have to be wrong.

Come to think of it, that's quite scary enough.

Richard Parks

Night Sky Mine, by Melissa Scott. *Tor Books, hardcover, \$24.95, 416 pages.*

There was a time when, if you were ill, you visited an apothecary's shop, where the pharmacist would prescribe and dispense medicines, an amalgam of powders and herbs, to treat your problems. In Melissa Scott's new novel, *Night Sky Mine*, there exist hypotheccaries, a cyberpunk updating of these olde shoppes, operated by people versed in the wild codes and mutations of the uncharted nets, who use this information to splice or breed new programs and solutions upon request—for cash.

This clever linguistic and stylistic trick is typical of the humor that infuses the complex post-apocalyptic society Scott creates. As in many futuristic cyberpunk worldviews, so much depends upon one's identity, one's def-

inition within the system, and anything which doesn't fit within the system is eliminated. Lisa Kelly, hypotheccary-in-training and the novel's protagonist, doesn't fit within the system, even with its elaborate relationship hierarchies and castes; she is a foundling, the only survivor of a pirate raid on an asteroid mine, someone without an identity.

There are many possible identities in the vast economic and political infrastructure of society Scott has built: the clannish Union workers, whose bodies have been fused with the machines they operate and whose skills are interchangeable on data chips; the elite businessfolk of the corporations of the Federation, disdainful and secure; and the Travellers, a nomadic people who walked away from the values of the establishment and created a niche of their own based upon barter and trade instead of money, whose classlessness, in time, became a caste of its own within the context of the system. Lisa fits into none of them; she isn't supposed to exist, according to the Company computers, despite her adopted mother's every attempt to buy or cajole a proper identity for her.

The novel opens with the somewhat-unwelcoming aspects of an apothecary's shop, those intentionally eerie and distancing effects that create a sense of mysterious and unknowable secrets lurking in all corners, the alien and weird prominently and grotesquely

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

Don't Forget Your Space-suit, Dear, edited by Jody Lynn Nye (Baen). Forget the square-jawed, steely-eyed heroes of SF and fantasy. What about their mothers? Azine McCaffrey, Mike Resnick, Robert Asprin, Esther Friesner, and others contribute to the mother of all anthologies.

Blameless In Abaddon, by James Morrow (Harcourt Brace). The two-mile long corpse of God was discovered in Morrow's last book, *Turning Jehoshaphat*, winning him the 1996 World Fantasy Award. This sequel, revealing that God isn't dead after all, may win him another.

Star Trek: The Joy Machine, by Theodore Sturgeon and James Gunn (Pocket). The late, great master of the SF short story wrote a never-filmed *Star Trek* treatment. James Gunn brings his own masterful touch to a complete novelization featuring the original crew.

Sunspacer Trilogy, by George Zebrowski (White Wolf). Civilization has spread from Mercury's mines to the icy void beyond Pluto. This omnibus volume gathers the linked novels *Sunspacer*, *The Stars Will Speak*, and, for the first time in



book form, trilogy caper *Behind the Stars*.

Ash of Stars: On the Writing of Samuel R. Delany, edited by James Sallis (University Press of Mississippi). To some, Delany is the greatest SF writer of the modern age. To others, he is an example of the worst excesses of the New Wave. Sallis sorts it all out for us.

Cybersex, edited by Richard Glyn Jones (Carroll & Graf). One thing certain about the future is that people will continue to be interested in matters sexual, as these stories by Harlan Ellison, Larry Niven, Kathie Koja, Thomas M. Disch, and many others prove.

Time and Chance: An Autobiography, by L. Sprague de Camp (Donald M. Grant). Over 60 years, this Grandmaster published 90 books and numerous short stories. He finally tells the most fascinating tale of all: his own.

Murder in the Solid State, by Wil McCarthy (Tor). A hard SF novel of futuristic suspense in which one man must battle to save his life, career, and country in 21st-century America. A Heinlein-esque examination of nanotechnology's possible problems and promises.



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displayed in plain sight. *Night Sky Mine* is slow reading for the first few chapters, while these complex social structures are established to make later tensions and conflicts understandable and obvious.

Ista's search for an identity — both who her parents were and what happened to them out on the mine, as well as a place within the elaborate social network — is the emotional fundament for the novel, and though there are many other complex clashes of this rigid class system — the prejudice a Union man and his male non-Union lover face from each of their respective societies, for their choice of both sex and class in a partner — the book is, at heart, an adventure novel, a cyber-thriller-cum-space-opera dogfight.

Scott deftly mixes, much like a hypocathery herself, these traditional genre tropes to create a distinct and original work, bursting with complexity. There is, in addition to all the above-mentioned elements, the "invisible world" of the nets, where code and programming live and breed in the patrolled Company nets of cyberspace, and mutate out on the wildnets, creating wilder and more dangerous programs that verge ever-closer toward genuine Artificial Intelligence. And it is posited, by hypocatheries who roam and harvest the invisible world, that if an AI ever did create itself, on some distant wildnet, it would be a malevolent creature, a Demogorgon, aware of the human world and seeking to destroy it, resulting in a second crash, one

even more devastating than the first apocalyptic crash that tore society apart.

As Ista, trying to escape the trouble she creates for herself in her search for an identity, joins forces with Rangsey and Tarasov, who are investigating the continued "pirate" raids surrounding the Night Sky Mine, they discover a corporate plot to grow a Demogorgon out in the asteroid belt. Amidst the emotional upheaval of returning to the abandoned mine where she was found, and the trouble that she's fleeing from, Ista must match wits and skills on the nets with a force that would surely test — if not instantly destroy — the most skilled of hypocatheries. The Company, of course, is not pleased at their efforts being discovered — or tampered with — and it's a race to see if their small team can defeat the Demogorgon before it or the Company does them in.

Any two or three of these diverse elements and conflicts would give the makings of an absorbing novel, yet Scott manages to tackle all of them and weave them into a coherent, action-filled (once you get past those first chapters) whole, with an emotionally satisfying ending, even though not everything hoped for or expected comes to pass.

If entertainment was the cure you're looking for, you've come to the right place.

Lawrence Schimel

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Trek was first beamed across the airwaves into the homes of an unsuspecting public, giving birth to a science fiction franchise that could not have been dreamed by even the most optimistic SF futurist. By now, over three decades later, you would have thought that the full tale of how Gene Roddenberry's vision was made reality had been told ad nauseam, and that there were no more secrets to be revealed. You'd be wrong. For with the publication of *Inside Star Trek: The Real Story* (Pocket Books, hardcover, 458 pages, \$30.00) by Herbert F. Solow and Robert H. Justman, a treasure trove of memories never before shared has been opened. Hollywood insiders will know the names of these authors, but members of the general public might find them both vaguely familiar, but be unsure why. Next time you catch an episode of the first *Star Trek*, keep a close eye on the credits, where you will spot Solow as the Executive in Charge of Production, and Justman as Co-Producer. These two, along with Roddenberry, formed the triumvirate that helped create the legend. Justman has long been a popular speaker at *Star Trek* conventions, but Solow has been silent all these years, keeping the true story of the most popular SF television series of all time to himself — until now. Lushly illustrated, full of insider gossip, and complete with reproductions of confidential internal memoranda, this volume at last tells the complete story of how *Star Trek* came to be, and is highly recommended.

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Cybersurfing the World Wide Web

As you cruise the Internet, don't miss these recommended home pages:

<http://eu-online.com/~avonruff/sfdbase.html> Hands-down winner of the best-informed sfnal Web Site in the universe goes to Al von Ruff's Internet Speculative Fiction Database. A completist's dream,

Web World this site indexes most of the short fiction, novels, poetry, and artwork published in the genre. Period. Easily navigated and always in flux, this site has the power to steal many, many hours of your life.

<http://www.cs.latrobe.edu.au/~agapow/Postviews/> An Australian collective brings us this highly subjective and well-organized collection of reviews of things genre: movies, novels, etc. Good, eclectic reading.

<http://www.disney.com/Disneyland/info/touring/newtmrw/> Disney's always been good for yucks when it comes to predicting the future, and nowhere more so than in the Tomorrowland of the Magic Kingdom in LA and Orlando. They're rebuilding Tomorrowland — again — and here's the hype they've released.



<http://www.astro.nyu.edu/lenta/mac/software/mac-trek.html> Not everyone has a Mac. But for those of you who do, this site contains links to gobs of free Star Trek software for "The Computer for the Rest of Us."

<http://www.wbanimation.com/> From the animation studios of Warner Brothers comes this content-rich eye-candy — Freakazoid, Animaniacs, Pinky and the Brain. Not for the impatient though, each screen takes FOREVER to load.

<http://www.leland.stanford.edu/~rosesage/Muppet.html> I gis in Cyber-space! A site devoted to the creators of the late, lamented Jim Henson, including a grassroots campaign to save the faltering *Muppets Tonight* show that aired last season.

<http://us.imdb.com/M/ist?genres%3DSci-Fi> A list of nearly 1,000 science fiction films, courtesy of The Internet Movie Database. Includes: cast lists, soundtrack notes, links to related sites, plot summaries, and minutiae aplenty.

<http://www.sfgate.com/sf/zippy/> The twisted mind of Bill Griffith has been responsible for the ultra-surreal "Zippy the Pinhead" comic strip for many years now, and yet, his microcephalic creation remains relatively obscure. Perhaps this Web site, hosted by the San Francisco Chronicle, can remedy the situation.

— Cory Doctorow

Lovecraft's Alien Legacy

In the beginning, dark and alien things ruled the world, according to the fevered imagination of H.P. Lovecraft, creator of the *Cthulu* Mythos. Lovecraft worked in the days before SF and horror worked out their not-so-amicable divorce, splitting into fully separate genres, and so it was never quite clear whether the all-powerful creatures were an alien race or true Elder Gods, as they were called in his tales. What cannot be denied is that the most powerful of them all was the great Cthulu, captured in many of the atmospheric paintings of artist Steve Hickman. (Readers wishing to discover more about Hickman's art should run back to David Drake's celebratory

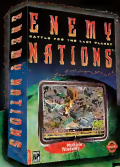
Collectibles Gallery essay in the November 1993 issue of this magazine. His cover art for such SF luminaries as Charles Sheffield, Larry Niven, and Anne McCaffrey are printed therein.) Bowen Designs has produced an eerie sculpture based on these powerful images of one of our most mythic creations. Each statue is seven-and-a-half inches tall on a two-inch-thick base of rich, dark hardwood from the Austrian Black Forest. The piece has been finished in a fine faux patina to give the metal a weird otherworldly look. One of Lovecraft's classic (and often reprinted and filmed) tales is titled "Pickman's Model," but if you're in the mood for something alien on your mantle, it is Hickman's model that should be your choice.



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SF's Comic Invasion

SF and comics have been in a sometimes uneasy partnership for years. But occasionally a graphic feature has highlighted science fiction at its best. Editor Stuart Moore hopes that DC Comics' new *Helix* line of SF comics will do just that.

Comics

"We're creating the themes, the plots, the look of SF for the next millennium." Toward that end he has commandeered many of the finest SF prose writers, and allied them with top-notch comics artists to create a new SF comics universe. Lucius Shephard, winner of the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy awards, has created *Vermillion*, a far-future city the size of several solar systems.

Christopher Hinz, Award-winning author of *Leige-Killer*, brings to comics his Paratwa warriors existing in two telepathically-linked bodies at once. Six titles are scheduled, with other creators to include Howard Chaykin, Timothy Truman, and others. More information is available on the *Helix* Web Site, accessible through www.dccomics.com.

SF's Grandmaster Artist

Perhaps the most respected and popular science fiction artist in the genre, Frank Kelly Freas practically defined SF. Since 1950 he has published hundreds of book and magazine covers, earning ten Hugo Awards for Best Artist. His accomplishments have been equally as remarkable

Collectibles

in the field of science fact, for it was Freas who designed the shoulder patch that adorned the astronauts of the Skylab 1 mission. "The reason I went into science fiction illustration," says Freas, "was because I was a big science fiction fan. I was an avid reader. I loved the stuff, and illustrating science fiction was all I ever wanted to do." Nowhere is that love of the field more evident than in the *Frank Kelly Freas Fantasy Art Trading Cards* series from FPG, a 50-card set that includes paintings currently hanging in the Smithsonian as well as art from his famous covers for Ace and DAW. The card backs contain anecdotes about their creation, as well as black-and-white sketches. The series includes five different metallic cards, and the publisher has randomly shipped 1,000 autographed cards in the card packs. There's no better way to build your own personal SF art museum.



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Simon and Schuster is so real that it takes three CDs to contain its edge-to-edge, full-motion video adventure. Jonathan Frakes (Commander William T. Riker himself) directed 90 minutes of new *Star Trek* footage, shot on the Paramount lot, that form the heart of the third in this acclaimed game series. Other members of the original cast and production crew aided in the game's creation, including Robert O'Reilly, who repeats his television role as Gowron, leader of the Klingon High Council. Players undergo the Starfleet's most rigorous holographic training in the language, culture, and warfare of the Federation's most lethal adversary. You will assume the role of a young Klingon warrior who must solve a murder while encountering strange aliens and treacherous friends, even serving aboard a Klingon battle cruiser. Along the way you will become proficient in Klingon, the fastest growing artificial language in the universe. If you manage to conquer the game's intriguing challenges, the next time one of your friends says, "Hingon Hol Dajuth'a," you'll know exactly how to answer!

NEW ON VIDEO

12 Monkeys: Fans of Terry Gilliam's dystopic future history *Brazil* won't want to miss his latest SF presentation. This tale of terrorism, time travel and madness stars Bruce Willis, Brad Pitt, Madeleine Stowe and Christopher Plummer.

Forbidden Planet: Before Leslie Nielsen became a comedy superstar, he played the hero in one of SF's classic films. This 1956 gem also starred Anne Francis and Walter Pidgeon, and introduced Robbie the Robot. Now available for the first time in a letterbox edition.

Barb Wire: *Playboy* model and "Baywatch" cast member Pamela Anderson Lee added the sizzle to SF in this cyberpunk action flick. The video will be also be available in a special unrated version featuring 11 minutes of erotic



footage in search of the third *Playboy*.

Heavy Metal: Back in 1981, 35 animated cult classic wove together sci-fi and fantasy tales with hard rock from such bands as Black Sabbath, Blue Oyster Cult and Devo.

An epilogue features three additional minutes of footage cut from the original release.

Lawnmower Man 2: Jobe's War: In this sequel to the much-rented original, a madman plans to use a virtual-reality-based global computer communication network to control the world. This sci-fi thriller stars Patrick (Patriot Games) Bergin and Matt (Max Headroom) Frewer.

Aeon Flux: This compilation of MTV's futuristic adventure series features the mysterious Aeon Flux, a fearless and obsessive secret agent who uses every weapon at her sensual command to battle a dictatorship in a gritty tomorrow. Definitely not your parents' animated cartoon.

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MOVIES

By Dan Perez

Carpenter and Russell reunite in the eagerly awaited *Escape from L.A.*



Kurt Russell returns as Snake in John Carpenter's *Escape From L.A.* ABOVE: Snake faces the Surgeon General of Beverly Hills (Bruce Campbell). BELOW: Carpenter, left, directs Russell and Steve Buscemi.

YOU MAY HAVE THOUGHT HE WAS DEAD, BUT SNAKE Plissken is back in business. The black-clad, eye-patched hero from director John Carpenter's 1981 cult favorite *Escape From New York* has returned for a sequel set in L.A. land.

Escape From L.A. takes place in 2013, when earthquake-ravaged Los Angeles has become an island. Kurt Russell returns to his role (and his Clint Eastwood-style intonation) as the tough-guy criminal who is pressed unwillingly into service. The movie also stars Stacy Keach, Steve Buscemi, Valerie Golino, and Peter Fonda. Carpenter co-wrote the screenplay with Debra Hill who also co-produced, a partnership they shared on the original *Escape*.

"We've been trying to do a sequel since '85," Carpenter notes. "Kurt and I were on a publicity thing for *Big Trouble*

Me [in Little China], and we were talking about how it would be great to go back and do that character again: Snake Plissken. He's a fun character. We didn't have a story for many years. We couldn't figure out a story. We had a script written by another writer [Coleman Luck] that didn't quite work out. It had some interesting things in it, but it wasn't quite what we wanted to do.

"But finally, we had a couple of events happen in Los Angeles, namely some riots in '92, an earthquake in '94, and we all got together and said, 'You know, maybe there is a story here. If we just try to tell the real story of Los Angeles — and why the hell didn't we leave? Because we're in denial. So, we started working on it from there, and came out with a script.'"

The story is set after a 9.6 earthquake strikes the city in 1999. "L.A. has become an island," says Carpenter, "off the coast of California. Basically, the United States is a theocracy in the future — it's 2013 — and all the morally guilty are deported to Los Angeles Island. The 'morally guilty' are a cross between the abortion doctors, teenage runaways, atheists — anybody who doesn't fit in the new moral America. They're booted out of the country to Los Angeles."

"Los Angeles is a pretty grim place. It resembles the L.A. of today, but unfortunately, the Third World has united to attack America — the revenge of preindustrial society. So one of these gang leaders in Los Angeles, Cuervo Jones, gets his hands on a doomsday device that could threaten America. So Snake Plissken is again sent on a mission. And he has to kill the president's daughter."

In *Escape From New York*, Plissken is working under a time limit to accomplish his mission, enforced by explosive pellets injected into his neck. What kind of incentive does the sequel provide? "Well, there's only one way to do it," Carpenter says. "You have to put something in him that's going to kill him. You've got to blow his head off or you've got to kill him with a virus. We put a Plutocin-7 virus in him — it's basically kind of like Ebola. And if he doesn't get out in time he's gone."

Plissken gets into the city via a one-man nuclear submarine. What follows is an often tongue-in-cheek tour of the City of Angels. "He goes under the San Fernando Sea," says Carpenter, "crashes through the ruins of the Universal Tower, makes his way to the Hollywood Bowl, down to Hollywood Boulevard, down Sunset and Beverly Hills — it's like: Here's Los Angeles for you!"

Currently available on video is the special edition of *Escape From New York*, which isn't a director's cut, but which does feature an interview with Carpenter in which he discusses some of the bargain-basement special effects for the modestly budgeted film. One example: all the computer graphics in Snake's glider were accomplished by duplicating Manhattan skyscrapers in black cardboard, outlining them with glowing tape and running a camera past them. *Escape From L.A.*'s budget is also lean: \$50 million, a fifth of which went to Russell. The special effects budget was \$5.5 million, and does feature



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real computer-graphic imaging this time out. "You mix and match," Carpenter observes. "Some things you have to do with models. The textures of computer graphics aren't quite happening yet — you need certain real-life models for them, whether it's animal movements or metal or whatever. So it's a combination of various things ... computer matting, computer models, everything you can imagine."

"It's the size," Carpenter says of the differences between original and sequel. "In other words, the first picture was \$7 million, and for that time it was a modest sum. And we did what we could with that budget. It was the same thing here. We had \$60 million this time, but in today's climate that's not a gigantic movie — that's an average film. So we do it within our means — we give you the biggest look we can. And we tailor the story for a look that won't disappoint you, hopefully."

Kurt Russell reportedly still fitted into his old Snake Plissken costume, but Carpenter updated the look. "That look was 1981 futuristic. This is 1996. We played around with a few things in terms of what he should look like. He puts on some 'stealth' clothing — he can't be detected by heat-seek; it's fire-retardant. So we thought 'Oh, if we're going to do that, why not redesign a little.'"

Bruce Campbell, who played Ash in the cult favorite *Army of Darkness*, puts in an appearance as the Surgeon General of Beverly Hills. "Beverly Hills is kind of a desolate wasteland," Carpenter explains. "The people who live there now are surgical failures: They've had too many face-lifts and implants over the years, their muscles have turned to Jell-O, and so they need fresh body parts over and over again. They have this surgical theater inside the ruins of the Beverly Hills Hotel, and they grab victims off the street, cut off their body parts, and transplant them. The Surgeon General has had one too many face-lifts himself: he looks a little strange."

When asked if the movie will contain jokes that Carpenter buffs or denizens of the real Los Angeles will notice, Carpenter says, "Oh my God, all the way through. But you know what? You have to have a little bit of truth in these things to make them work. In other words, you have to show a world that's not too removed from what we have now. And so basically, you'll get a tour of Los Angeles that's not too unfamiliar to some of us."

To film a story that takes place in one night, Carpenter, cast, and crew had to shoot for 70 nights at the different locations in the city and environs. "There's no one thing that's difficult," the 48-year-old director notes about the grueling schedule. "It's when you take it all and do it all at once. In other words, when you start in December and finish in March, and you've shot 70 straight nights, what you do is you stay up on the weekends because you don't want to turn around — it would be like jet lag. So I've been up for 90 nights. And you lose track of

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life, and you really have to work hard to keep up your energy, your focus. You can't just go on adrenaline, or coffee and cigarettes. It has to be other things. Especially when you get to be my age you can't do that. You young kids could, I suppose."

Carpenter has often written soundtrack music for his movies, as well. Will he revive his signature theme from the original *Escape* for the sequel? "I thought we might do that, yeah," he says. "I'm working with a co-composer — Shirley Walker is on board doing part of the work, and I'm doing part of the work."

Of reuniting with Debra Hill, Carpenter says, "Well, you know we had all done the original, so it was very familiar. And I can't think of an actor, a producer, and a director who could have done any better, because we weren't learning about the world we were in. We'd already done it."

How does a director making a sequel second-guess audience expectations? "The truth is," Carpenter says, "audiences want it the same, but different. However you figure out the different part, you know they want the same. But they don't really want the same; they want it different, too."

A running gag in *Escape From New York* had Plissken encountering characters who said, "I thought you were dead." Will the new movie have something similar? "Oh yeah," Carpenter affirms, "There are a couple of those. I don't know if they're going to be as good as I thought you were dead," though. But now you've heard that in other movies, so you

can't go back and revisit it."

What does Carpenter think about the undying trend of action movie one-liners like "You've been erased" (from the Schwarzenegger vehicle *Eraser*). Oh, God," Carpenter says wearily. "That's clever? I have a tough time with one-liners. I just really worry about them. 'Consider it a divorce,' or whatever. Ay yi yi."

Carpenter is developing several projects at the moment, but one movie we won't be seeing from him is a sequel to *Big Trouble in Little China*, which also starred Kurt Russell. "Nobody liked it, nobody went to see it, the reviewers panned it — it was in the trash can for years before people rediscovered it. That's the business. It's just one of those things you have to keep in mind. Audience tastes change. Sometimes they don't get things. Sometimes they get them and they don't like them. It's OK."

Is there a particular actor Carpenter would like to work with? "I'd love to work with Chow Yun Fat. He's the Robert Mitchum of China. This guy is the ultimate cool."

As for other new projects, Carpenter says, "There are a couple of things sitting around. I've got a couple of ideas I've wanted to do. I hate to mention what they are — I don't have anything on paper except for some ideas and notes. I have a thriller, the science fiction film I want to do, a new movie that takes place on Mars. Mainly what I'm looking forward to is vacation!"

When asked if there's anything different, newer, or more exciting about *Escape From L.A.* than there was about its predecessor, Carpenter wisecracks: "It's different, it's newer, and it's more exciting than *Escape From New York*. Basically because we had a chance to do a bigger adventure. The adventure

in the first movie, when you really boil it down, is a small adventure. When you look at what Plissken does — he doesn't fight very much. It's one little fight and he gets captured. [*Escape From L.A.*] is outrageous in some ways, it's got some really big action scenes, it's wonderful — spend all your money to go see it so I can retire. I need to retire and this is your chance to get me out of the business, if all of you will go." □



You'd be surprised at how much science Science Fiction gets wrong.



Star Trek provides the public with its most well-known images of robots and cyborgs. But how likely are these images to come true?

IT WOULD BE NICE IF YOU COULD COUNT ON ALL OF THE science you found in Science Fiction to be accurate. Unfortunately, it isn't quite that simple. Not only do some writers fudge their science when accuracy would interfere with a rousing tale, but in addition, not all of us are knowledgeable enough to catch these errors ourselves. So *Science Fiction Age* found two scientists/SF writers who are always on the look-out for flagrant science violations to discuss this problem.

Catherine Asaro earned her Ph.D in Chemical Physics from Harvard. Among the places her works has taken here are the Max Planck Institut für Astrophysik in Germany, the Chemical Physics Theory Group at the University of Toronto, and the Institute for Atomic and Molecular Physics at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. Her SF novel *Primary Inversion* is currently out from Tor, with *Catch the Lightening* due out in December 1996. Geoffrey A. Landis works for the Ohio Aerospace Institute at the NASA Lewis Research Center. Landis has won a Hugo Award for "A Walk in the Sun" and a Nebula Award for *Ripples in the Dirac Sea*. He is well-known for doing the research needed to make sure his science content is accurate.

SF AGE: Anyone who has been reading SF for awhile has noticed that science fact and science fiction often go astray, sometimes in small ways, and sometimes in big ones. Not all of us of us have the knowledge to notice this, but you both, working scientists who are also SF writers, do. How have you seen science misrepresented in SF?

ASARO: I think it has become harder to do the science

right as the genre has matured, because science — physics in particular — has advanced to a less accessible level.

LANDIS: Science fiction in the early years was indeed a lot more naive. There are a lot of things that we see are clearly "errors" now that were still at least a bit plausible in the beginning of this century, like the oceans of Venus and the ancient, decadent Martians with their dying cities. (Although even by the '40s, when a lot of these stories were written, the astronomers had a good idea that the planets weren't going to be that close to Earthlike.) But I suppose we can forgive our favorite writers for being optimistic.

ASARO: Now that we know so much more about what the planets are actually like, readers want to see that reflected in SF. It's true, though, those early stories were great to read.

SF AGE: Catherine said that fictional science is harder to do right because the real science has become less accessible. But is it that science has become less accessible, or is it that people have become less willing to accept things, and have become less gullible. For instance, Charles Sheffield in these pages once mentioned a story he'd read in which an astronomer looking through a telescope saw a great bird fly to an outer planet, roost on it — and it hatched!

ASARO: By less accessible I meant, for example, that to have an FTL drive reasonably consistent with what we know about science, a writer needs to understand principles of physics well beyond what was needed, say, 40 years ago.

SF AGE: So where has SF gone astray?

LANDIS: Well, there are so many places where various authors have said silly things that it would take us the whole issue if we were to just list them.

ASARO: I've always been struck by the way that faster-than-light travel is used as a sort of "magic" time machine. It doesn't work that way.

LANDIS: Doesn't it? I think that exactly the opposite is true: SF writers have been using faster than light travel without coming to terms with the fact that FTL travel would give us time travel.

ASARO: I know what you mean. Either we have FTL with no time-travel, or else time-travel anyway, anyhow, anytime, with vague references to "FTL machinery". It's true that at superluminal (FTL) speeds we can go pastward, but only under specific conditions.

LANDIS: I also think that this may be a bit difficult to discuss in terms that the general audience will understand. SF AGE: Asimov could get anyone to understand anything — I'm sure you're up to the task, Geoff.

ASARO: To go back in time at superluminal speeds requires that a space ship be going fast relative to us folks here in the sublight universe. By the time I got back to, say before I was born, I would be a long way from home.

LANDIS: Right. The barrier between "past" and "future" is the light cone (or the two light cones, actually; the future and the past light cone). If you can cross the

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light cone, there's no barrier between past and future.

ASARO: The speed of light is a barrier between here and "elsewhere." However, if we could add an imaginary part to our speed, we could "go around" light speed and enter the FTL universe. I have an article about it in the April 1996 *American Journal of Physics*. Of course, just as relativity and quantum theory replaced classical physics in the realm of the fast and small, we may need new or improved theories for the superluminal realm.

LANDIS: Sigh. This is an interesting point, but I really think it would take several tens of thousands of words, and pictures, to explain properly, and even then nine-tenths of the readers will be bored stiff.

ASARO: The main point is that to use FTL theories for time travel requires certain conditions to be met.

LANDIS: You have to travel two directions to do it; out and back.

ASARO: But when you come back, you reverse your velocity, which means you may be traveling futureward again.

LANDIS: In which reference frame?

ASARO: The one for the observer who recorded us going back in time. If we simply reverse direction, our speed is negative compared to before. It turns out that in such a case, the observer records us going forward in time. And that's just one dimension. It gets more complicated with more dimensions.

LANDIS: But the "X" doesn't have a horizontal bar. Once you've crossed into the "elsewhere" part of the light cone, there's no barrier to going anywhere within it. Even the "past" part.

ASARO: That's right. But it isn't as easy as turning on the time machine and popping out in the same place at an earlier time. If we invoke superluminal physics, we can't move in time without moving in space, too. Related to that is the mistake of having characters travel in time without taking into account that the Earth (or other location) will be in a different place at a different time.

SP AGE: Okay — who has handled this the most correctly in fiction? Any examples?

LANDIS: Hmram. Very few people have handled it at all in fiction.

SP AGE: Why is that, Geoff?

LANDIS: Putting time travel together with space travel opens up so many possibilities, that it's hard to sort them out. Robert Forward, in *Timecounter*, explores some of the timespace travel via wormholes.

ASARO: Gregory Benford does some nifty things with spacetime. (I played with it some in my book *Primary Inversion*, too.) Ian Stewart had a good science fact article on time travel in the January 1994 *Analog*. And Charles Sheffield uses relativity well.

LANDIS: Actually, I've never understood that part of Benford's Galactic Center novels.

ASARO: I'm thinking of his stories where spacetime is like a landscape.

LANDIS: His "Spacetime" doesn't seem to

act like space, or time, or spacetime. I suppose I should ask him about it sometime.

ASARO: I think he's put his characters in a higher dimensional universe. They interact with the lower dimensional spacetime as if it were a landscape rather than the dimension we live in. It's pretty neat. I'd love to ask him about it sometime.

SP AGE: What other SF tropes bother you?

LANDIS: There are a few scenes in SF that get to me. It seems whenever anybody flies from Earth to, say, Jupiter, they pass

by Mars on the way. Mars just never happens to be on the other side of the sun. When aliens come in to the solar system, they pass by Pluto, then Neptune, then Uranus ... all the planets are lined up. Even when the aliens are coming from Alpha Centauri! The reason that's funny is that Alpha Centauri is way out of the plane of the solar system.

ASARO: That's right. Besides, Pluto spends part of its orbit inside Neptune's orbit.

LANDIS: It's way south — if you were going from Alpha Centauri to Earth, you wouldn't pass any of the planets.

ASARO: Good point! My pet peeve is nanotech. It's used like magic. "Now we can do anything because we have nanomachines."

LANDIS: Yes, nanotech bothers me, too, the way it's used in far too much SF.

ASARO: Infinite lifespans, houses that do anything for us, and so on. Yet little else in life appears changed. If our technology advanced to that point, our entire way of life would radically change.

LANDIS: Right! If the time we came up with the vastly powerful

nanotechnology that the stories assume, everything will have been changed by the earlier, simpler applications. I was reading Eric Drexler's book *Nanosystems* the other day.

ASARO: Does he address the question of the fact that atoms and molecules differ from mechanical parts in that they bond to each other, whereas levers and ball bearings in macro-sized systems don't? That's not to say that molecules can't be used in a manner similar to macro-sized components, just that it's more complicated than often described.

LANDIS: He answers some of the criticisms of nanotechnological assembly at the beginning of the book by saying that, of course nanotechnological assembly will take place in an enclosed environment, inside a nearly perfect vacuum, with perfectly pure feedstocks. But the SF writers all seem to assume that once you build a nano-anything, it can operate in any environment, take apart any feedstock, and run forever with no access to energy or method of communicating with the outside.

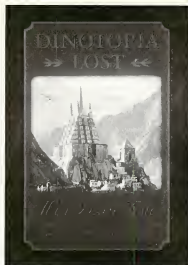
ASARO: And they do this all without generating heat!

LANDIS: When you get to the nano scale, eyes don't work any more. Nanomachines can't see; they have to do everything by feel. So the first nanotechnological devices will be a lot more limited than the universal assemblers that SF loves so much.

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SF AGE: Speaking of limitless energy, what do the stories that assume limitless energy get wrong — the ones where we've solved all issues of the atom and have endless supply?

LANDIS: The SF energy sources never seem to have any waste heat.

ASARO: Energy is related to both nanotech and PTL travel in the sense that if we ever master either technology, it will probably also solve our energy problems, at least in terms of the energy demands of present day life. But yes to what Geoff just said, that the first nano-devices will be much more limited. Actually, we have some already.

LANDIS: We call them "enzymes".

ASARO: Crude bioelectrodes exist too.

SF AGE: Will anyone write any more stories about people who shrink and shrink and find themselves inside pocket universes inside atoms?

LANDIS: Finding universes inside an atom is another one that, I'm afraid — like the canals of Mars — belongs to an earlier, simpler age.

ASARO: Shrinking humans is a real problem. It's the old volume-to-area-ratio problem. That ratio doesn't remain constant as size changes.

LANDIS: I think we now know that there are no universes inside the atom.

ASARO: Quarks bought up all the real estate.

LANDIS: Instead there is the mysterious land of the quantum, but it would be hard to imagine it being possible to make anything as complex as a person into an atom size.

SF AGE: So it's in the "can no longer be done" category?

ASARO: I think it could be done, but in a different way. Perhaps using subatomic probes linked to some sort of virtual reality setup. So the person doesn't actually shrink, but "sees" through the probe.

LANDIS: Well, if we had this nanotechnology, we could imagine re-engineering people smaller — or maybe, as Catherine says, telebots smaller and smaller.

ASARO: If we made ourselves tiny, we would probably have to change our form to one more optimal for the smaller size.

LANDIS: Michael Bishop did the telebot one, in a story called "The Omniaidium Miniatures".

SF AGE: So if we made a list of stories that could no longer be written, wouldn't that just be a challenge for people to go out and try to write them?

LANDIS: It might be interesting to redo the shrinking humans stories of the past, to use real knowledge of tiny stuff, at that! But worlds inside the atom — that will have to remain fantasy.

ASARO: Honey, I Shrink the Nanoprogeny!

SF AGE: So what are the stories that can no longer be written — other than Martians, shrinking, and such?

ASARO: Actually, I think anything can be written. We would just do it differently now.

SF AGE: Anything? Would you write about a bird hatching one of the outer planets now?

ASARO: Sure. It would just have properties very different from a normal Earth's type bird! I'll bet it would be a lot of fun trying to figure out how to make it work.

LANDIS: Another type of story that people can't really write any more is the one in which the sun suddenly goes nova. A long time ago, nobody knew what types of stars went nova. Now we know that the Sun just isn't the type — it's a boring, ordinary, main-sequence star, not the nova-type. Nor the super-nova-type either, for that matter.

ASARO: Another story device that won't work is having humans originate on some other planet and come to Earth relatively late in its history. We have enough data now to be fairly certain humans originated on Earth.

LANDIS: Oh, yes. DNA tests have pretty much killed that one. Our DNA is just like every other life forms in structure. It's not uniquely different. In fact, it's barely different from a chimp's DNA.

ASARO: That's right. The flip side of that coin is the story where life is discovered on another planet that has DNA like ours, close enough to allow reproduction! That isn't likely either. It assumes evolution followed the same path under independent conditions.

LANDIS: There go half the characters in *Star Trek*! No more half-humans, half-Vulcans.

ASARO: *Star Trek: The Next Generation* had an episode like that, "The Chase," I believe. Turns out an alien race seeded the galaxy with the DNA that led to humans, Klingons, Romulans, and so on. Realistically by the time we all evolved on our respective planets, divergent evolution would most likely make us far too different to interbreed. Than again, any race that could seed a galaxy might be able to include a control mechanism in the DNA that favored human-like evolution.

SF AGE: That's an invalidation of all the Bug-Eyed Monster captures nubile virgin stories, right?

LANDIS: BEMS would probably be attracted to nubile virgins just about as much as we are attracted to nubile squids. Only probably less so, since we're a lot more closely related to the squids than to the BEMS.

SF AGE: Some of us are attracted to nubile squids — it's just that we want to breed them! Which is most likely what the BEMS wanted to do to the virgins.

LANDIS: I think Damon Knight wrote that one already.

ASARO: Ah, yes. "To Serve Man."

LANDIS: Actually, the SF cliché that really gets to me the worst is the one that when you're in a bad fix, your hastily cobbled together gadget works the first time. "It's a crazy idea, but it just might work!" No chance. In the real world, things never work the first time.

ASARO: Is that ever true! Also, some early SF shows its age in that it looks, like stories that have spaceships flying around with no

Continued on page 102

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Once the Zhir rule the universe, Earth
will be little more than a playground
for rich visitors ... until the day that
the natives stop playing.

SHE WORE SKINTIGHTS AND SHADES AND a jacket open all the way down, and walked as though she owned the whole city. Maybe she did, at that; everything else on Earth was for sale, so why not Manhattanland? She was human, too, at least originally; a Zhir might have chosen that tiny body, but it wouldn't walk like *that*, and it certainly wouldn't

BY STEPHEN DEDMAN

Illustrated by Jon Foster

TOURIST TRADE

stroll into a blind alley. She must have had those legs since she was thirteen. I wondered what they were worth.

Seven muggers followed her into the alley before I could cross the street. I heard the first scream and the sound of something breaking a few seconds later. By the time I was in a position to see the show, there was a knife-slash across the woman's jacket and the first mugger was on all fours, his mouth and chin and mustache wet with blood. It was easy to guess what had happened; he'd been a little faster than she'd expected, but she'd managed to grab his wrist and disarm him and throw him face-first into a wall before he'd done any real damage. The others were already backing away when she hook-kicked the first in the ribs; he rolled with it, and scampered out of range, leaving his carpet-knife as a souvenir. The Guild doesn't pay them to be heroes.

I whistled, piercingly, and the pack turned around and stared at me. A moment later, they'd melted into the darkness so well that even I couldn't see them. I walked into the alley cautiously, bowing when I was a safe three meters from the woman.

"Who the fuck are you?" she growled.

"Edgar Allan Poe, at your service, my lady —"

"Cut the crap."

"—but you can call me Eddy."

She looked at me for a moment. Her right eyes must have been better than mine: probably infrared. Zhir stardrive kills anything larger than a single cell; anyone who wants to travel between worlds has to have a braincase played into an android body. This one was obviously a combat model.

"Shouldn't you have a blackbird on your shoulder or something? What are you doing here?"

"I live here," I replied. "I'm one of the attractions; the city pays me to walk around, pose for holos for the tourists, give directions, that sort of thing. What about you?"

She laughed. "I'm from out of town. New Geneva. And I didn't need any help."

"No, probably not."

"So why did you butt in?"

"I knew you were outnumbered," I glanced pointedly at the rip in

"Is that illegal or something?"

I laughed again. "Not here. You're a tourist; for you, nothing is illegal. Only expensive."

"How much would it cost me if I killed you?"

I grinned. "I'm not cheap; like I said, I'm one of the attractions. Not am I easy, unless you have a gun. She didn't even blink; of course she had a gun. Good. "Of course, the Zhir might have other ideas about what is and isn't legal, if they knew what you did while you were here ..."

She ignored that. "And the muggers are there? In Central Park?"

"If you know where to look; Central Park's pretty big, but a guide —"

"I thought you were off duty."

"This I do for a commission."

She turned her back on me and quickened her pace; short as she was, she was fast, and I probably couldn't have caught her if she hadn't stopped to look at a display of knives in a window. "What do you want?" she demanded, wearily.

"I think you're going to get hurt."

"What business is that of yours?"

"I get a commission from the hospital and the ambulance, too."

She reached out and grabbed me by the lapels of my greatcoat, lifting me half a meter off the ground. "It's cheaper than letting them loot your body," I added, mildly. "There's a real market for parts like yours."

"What if you get hurt, too?"

"I'm a landmark; I have immunity. Sort of like Virgil in the *Inferno*."

She put me down, shaking her head. "I guess I can't stop you."

I smiled. "You're a good guesser."

She looked around. Times Square was empty apart from the hookers and hustlers and rubbemeckers. "What if I just beat the crap out of that pimp?"

"Not a very private place for a murder, and convincing the city that it was self-defense would probably cost you an arm and a leg. The city keeps half, his family gets the rest ... buying all these witnesses would cost you even more."

"What about the subway?"

"Sorry, no. You want to play Bernie Goetz, you have to book ahead."

She stared, probably wondering whether or not I was serious, then sauntered down the graffiti-scrawled stairs into the subway. She stopped when she reached the gates, stared at her credcard, and looked around helplessly. I coughed quietly, and when she turned and drew her gun, I threw her a subway token. She caught it between two fingers.

"There haven't been any clerks down here for years," I said. "I could tell you where you could buy some ..."

She glared, and then shrugged. "OK, you've made your point. How much commission?"

THE CARRIAGE WAS EMPTY BUT FOR A STONY-FACED GUARDIAN ANGEL and a bag lady coughing up her lungs. Most of the graffiti read "ZHIR OUT?" "Were your grandparents mugged?" I asked.

She was silent for nearly a minute, then she nodded.

"But the Zhir took them to New Geneva and they lived happily ever after?"

"No. My grandmother and my father went to Covenant; my grandfather was stabbed to death near here for a few dollars."

"When was this?"

"1990."

Seventy-five years ago ... I revised my estimate of her age sharply upward. Of course, androids don't age. "And you've come here to avenge them?"

She didn't bother answering, but of course she had. Zhir may not believe in revenge or feuding, but we're less like the Zhir than they

"It's cheaper than letting them loot your body," I added. "There's a real market for parts like yours."

her jacket. "A lot of tourists underestimate the risks. Where are you going now?"

She picked up the knife, and pocketed it. "Are you a cop, too?"

I laughed. "I've been called a lot of things, but never that. I just thought you might need a guide. I know this city as well as anyone, the scum and the dregs and everything in-between; whatever it is you want, my lady, I can show it to you."

She looked as though she was considering it, but then she shrugged. "No thanks. I have a map, and my grandparents used to live here."

"Some things aren't on any map."

"It's a good map."

"Things move," I warned her. "Some of them have to hide from the Zhir. And some of them you won't get into without a guide, someone they know and trust ..."

"No thanks," she repeated. I shrugged, stepped aside, and then followed her along 42nd at what I hoped was a discreet distance, but maybe I misjudged it; she turned on her heel and confronted me after fifty meters.

"What do you want?"

I could have told her that I liked short women, but I didn't want to be found dying in a gutter. "I'm taking the subway."

"Isn't that a bit anachronistic?"

I shrugged. "No more than you are. Besides, no one cares about history any more — this is Manhattanland; it's a theme park, not a museum — and I'm sort of off duty. Going to Central Park?"

"What makes you think that?"


"You're looking for muggers to beat up, where else would you go?"

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realize: For one thing, Zhir children are almost exactly like their parents, psychologically as well as physically, because Zhir pass on most of their memories with other genetic material and they don't seem to understand that we don't do the same. This woman's grandmother must have been virtuous enough by Zhir standards, or she wouldn't have passed a psycho-scan and gotten off Earth, but that didn't mean the woman sitting next to me was a saint.

She stared at the bag lady. "Is the air that bad here?"

"You don't need to breathe, either, do you? Yeah, it's that bad; we're still using the same sort of tech that we were when the Zhir arrived."

"Why?"

"No one on Earth invents anything anymore. Why should they? The Zhir invented it all millennia ago, and it's a lot faster and just a little bit cheaper to buy it from them, even if they do jack up their prices when they deal with perverts like us."

"It's not that bad."

"The hell it's not. They won't let us have anything we could use to get offworld or use as a weapon against them. They won't sell us stunners, even for our cops, because it's easier to bulletproof an android than it is to stunproof one. Their energy technology is right out —"

"Conversion is dangerous."

"We're still burning coal and oil and radioactives, and we're nearly out of those; you wouldn't believe how much power it takes just to heat the sewers so the alligators don't die, and the sky's too thick for any solar panels we can build to work worth a damn. If the Zhir won't sell us total conversion — and believe me, we'll buy their fail-safes as well, if we can — they must have tech that's centuries out of date that we could use."

She considered that for a moment, then shrugged. "Unfortunately, there's not much left on Earth that you can trade with them —"

"Tell me about it. We let them take too much when they first arrived, before we realized that they were going to give us fuck-all in exchange. They've taken cloning cells of all our animals for their zoos, they've looted our museums of everything they think has any value, and the stuff we wouldn't sell at their price, they copied. Tourist trade is nearly all we have left."

"And you try to rob us?"

"And the Zhir didn't rob us?" She snorted. "Sure, we'll take what you have if we can, but no one forced you to come here."

"Why did those guys follow me into that alley?"

"They knew you wanted to party — you wouldn't have gone down there otherwise — but they probably weren't sure what sort of party. A lot of tourists still come here looking for rough trade and hope the Zhir don't read their braintapes on their way home — they don't, do they?"

"I don't think so."

"None of your friends ever came to Earth before? Never went to Pornoland or Gangworld or Vegas or anything else the Zhir would execute you for if they knew about it?" She didn't answer. "You're taking a hell of a chance if —"

"Everybody I know who's been to Earth came back OK," she said, quietly. "I know the Zhir can read braintapes, but I don't think they ever do. Maybe they think it's bad namers or something, or maybe they really believe that we're like them, that anyone whose ancestors passed a psycho-scan simply wouldn't do anything — well, that the Zhir wouldn't like."

"I hope you're right. Anyway, they probably guessed that you wanted to fight but, like I said, a lot of tourists overestimate their chances, especially if they depend on their stunners. Someone who was really fast on the draw might get two or three muggers before the others reached him; it was just their bad luck that you knew how to fight. And a stunner costs as much on the black market as a Porsche

with a tank of gas, it's worth taking a few risks for. Besides, they're another attraction, in their way; it wouldn't be Manhattanland without muggers. They even belong to the Extra's Guild, and they're really hard on scars. But don't get me wrong, they'd kill you if they could, and smile while they did. Here's our stop."

THE PLATFORM WAS LIT BY ONE FLICKERING FLUORESCENT LIGHT; ALL the others had burnt out or been stolen and were rarely replaced. I noticed Crazy Joe standing in the darkness, on his way home from his daily vigil at Lennon's shrine, and tried to sneak past him, but he noticed the girl and turned on me. "Alan! Half quising well met!" he cackled. "You still sucking scam?"

I felt sorry for the old fool, sometimes; I'd try explaining things to him, but he can't keep his mouth shut long enough to listen. "We all got to live, Joe."

"Yeah? Why?"

"'Cause it pisses off the Zhir, I guess."

He stared at us, and then laughed. "Sharp. Very sharp. Careful you don't cut yourself with that one; it might have two edges."

I shrugged, and hustled the girl toward the exit. "You're a traitor to your kind, Alan," Joe said, almost kindly.

"I got a wife and kids, Joe. What's your boyfriend do for money?"

"Fucking traitor!" He spat at my feet; fortunately, he was too

"Someone who was really fast on the draw might get two or three muggers before the others reached him..."

devout a Lennonist (and too broke) to carry a gun, and too cowardly to come at me without one.

"Nevermore," I replied, softly, and the girl and I kept walking until we were on Park Avenue.

"Is that your real name?" she asked, softly. "Alan?"

"Yeah."

She nodded. "I'm Lisa."

"Hi."

"Do you really have a wife and kids?"

"Yeah. The eldest, Nikki, is on Arlon, and we're trying to save enough to get the others offworld. We'd love to join her, but of course we never will... and she's never come back here. I just hope she's not ashamed of us."

"What does your wife do?"

"Simone? She teaches martial arts. Used to be a dancer, when she was younger. You'd probably like her, either."

We crossed the street in silence. "How did you get to be Edgar Allan Poe?"

"I was too short for King Kong and too hairy for Ed Koch."

"I'm serious."

"OK. I look enough like him to pass, I'm literate in English and French, I'd read some of his stories, I was about the right age, and I'm not allergic to cats. Besides, my family's been in show business for a long time, like Poe's; my grandfather used to work in Disneyland, the original one, back when humans used to go there to look at androids." I smiled, but she didn't smile back.

There were probably lights in Central Park, once, but not in my lifetime. It wasn't as dangerous as it looked, but it was bad enough

Excuse me, please!

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that even the muggers traveled in groups. Lisa walked in without hesitation. "The way that guy was talking ... is that how most New Yorkers feel about us, really?"

"Most Earthers," I replied, nodding. "They hate you even more than they hate the Zhir ... although most of us would do exactly the same as you did, if we were given the chance. Someone's following us."

"Yes, I know. Three of them." I shut up. "You're obviously pretty smart; why are you still on Earth?"

"Well, when I was a teenager, I slept with anyone who said yes in a language I understood. And I said yes to a few others. Most of them were women, but not all; one of them is now Crazy Joe's boyfriend, which is the *real* reason Joe hates me." Zhir mate for life, and they regard any other form of behavior as unnatural and evil. "If I showed up for a psycho-scan, the Zhir'd have me killed."

"And your wife ... ?"

I shrugged. Zhir hate parent-child incest even more than they hate homosexuality. Unfortunately, because they have no concept of rape, they execute the children as well as the parents. "So, yeah, most of us hate you, but some of us realize we depend on you too. You're the only hope we—"

I heard leaves rustling, and suddenly some idiot dropped out of a tree and landed a few feet in front of Lisa. She kicked him under the chin while he was trying to stand; he measured his length in

anyone. "What're you tagging along for?" she asked, looking up and down the street for a cab. "Haven't I paid you enough?"

"What're you going to do now?"

"What?"

"If you still want to fight someone, I know a place where they have fights every night. Choice of weapons, all comers, last one to walk out claims the pot."

She kept her back to me, but I could almost hear her thinking. "Or, if you're tired, I can get you into a snuff movie, an S&M club, or a dog-fight ..."

She snorted. "I don't get tired. This place ..."

"Yes?"

A cab appeared, and she flagged it down. "... where is it?"

"You won't get in without me."

The taxi clugged to a halt a few meters away. Lisa looked at her watch, and then nodded. "OK. Where do we go?"

THE CABBE DROPPED US OUTSIDE MCGUIRK'S SUICIDE HALL, AND I waited until he was gone before taking Lisa around the corner: I wouldn't want everyone to be able to find the place.

There were no signs outside, but the stairwell walls were lined with ancient photos and pin-ups of big-breasted porno stars and strippers, left over from the days when it had been a girls bar. Lisa raised an eyebrow at the collection, obviously amused. The bouncer at the door was only half a head taller than me, but his chest measurement rivaled that of many of the silicon-stuffed strippers, and his pin-striped suit looked as though it should have electronic locks. He held out a hand the size of a baseball mitt, coughed, and intoned, in Italian, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter by me."

"She's with me, Mike."

"Not with that gun, she isn't," he said, switching to English.

I shrugged, and turned back to Lisa. "He wants your stunner."

Lisa hesitated. The gun was worth a fortune, but she obviously wanted in; it was almost palpable. She looked up at Mike, and smiled. "Can I give it to him?"

I hate it when they trust me. Mike looked at me, slightly puzzled, then shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so."

"OK." She reached into her pocket, and pulled out the stunner. It was disguised as a pink plastic .25 automatic with a laser sight; it even had a forged Chanel logo. I pocketed it, and Mike stood aside, holding the massive door open and waving Lisa in. As soon as she stepped in front of me, I put the stunner to her head and squeezed the trigger.

She collapsed immediately, without any time to look surprised. I held the beam on her head long enough to completely wipe her memory — it takes less than a minute — and then Mike picked her up and carried her in.

The braintaper we'd built probably didn't look like a Zhir model — it more than half-filled the room, and most of the parts came from Laser Shag — but it worked. And unlike the Zhir, we didn't destroy the originals: I'd played my braintape into an android a year ago, and this would be Simone's third. One of them must have gotten to Avalon and Nikki by now ... unless Lisa was wrong and the Zhir *were* reading the braintapes and destroying the ones they considered wrong or tainted. Or maybe our tapes just didn't survive Zhir stardrive. Until Nikki returned to Earth or sent us a message, we had no way of knowing what had happened, so we could only continue trying ...

I looked at Lisa, then pocketed her gun and walked away. Sometimes I wish I could explain to some of them. It's not revenge for stranding us here, it's just survival. They are our only hope. And none of them is an innocent; we lure them here with rape and murder and give them every chance to turn back. We're no worse than they are —

Are we? □

"I didn't see what happened, but the giant did; he threw up, and then scrambled into the bushes."

the mud, and stayed there. Two guys rushed her, one from the right, one from the left; she grabbed the first and threw him into the second. Before they were back on their feet, I felt the muzzle of a gun stroking the back of my neck. I cleared my throat. "Nevertheless," I intoned.

The gun pulled back slightly as another mugger appeared — at least two meters tall, and built like a weight-lifter, but slower than the others. The gunman swore, softly. "She with you?"

"No," replied Lisa, as she closed with the giant. The gunman sighed, and fired a burst at her head. I ducked, in case there were any ricochets. The impact knocked her down; she fell expertly, and rolled; the giant raised a foot to stomp on her, and she kicked his other leg out from beneath him. The giant fell; Lisa was back on her feet an instant later, and the machine-pistol fired again. He missed, and she ran at him. I didn't see what happened, but the giant did; he threw up, and then scrambled back into the bushes. The other two muggers simply vanished.

Lisa reappeared from behind me a moment later. She looked totally clean; I guess her clothes were friction-free or something. She handed me the gun, but I shook my head and kept my hands by my sides.

"You could sell it; it must be worth something."

"No, thanks. We'd better get out of here."

"Why?"

"The shots. No one else is going to show up here, unless it's the cops."

She shrugged, threw the machine-pistol into the bushes, and headed back to Park Avenue. I followed, being careful not to step on

Kell the Artificer had used his genius to devise many elegant creations. The Alien needed him to create just one more.

1. THE VISITOR STAR, WHICH THE people foolishly think of as a tree, is growing larger overhead every night. Of course it is no sort of tree at all, but simply the kind of bright wandering star that star-watchers call a comet; but to the common folk it is a tree, a tree that is descending upon us from the heavens. They fear that it means to fall upon the world and bring about the destruction of all things.

It is easy enough to see why the people believe that. Through all the weeks of its presence above us the visitor star has steadily gotten bigger and brighter; it has become amazingly bright by now, astonishingly huge above us. But I know that it will not fall on us. I have plotted its position night by night; I see that it moves constantly to the north and east in the sky all the while that it is approaching us.

Plainly it will miss us by a goodly distance and sail onward through the cold, empty spaces that surround us until it plummets into the Sun. Or, what is more likely, it will not enter the Sun but will swing on an arc about it like a pebble on a string, as comets of the past have been known to do, until finally it is caught in the hand of Maldaz, or perhaps one of the other gods who watches over us; and the god will hurl it back across the heavens to whatever place it came from.

All this week I have wanted to speak with the Alien about the comet and its movements — soon, before the king changes his mind again and decides to have him put to death after all.

The Alien, naturally, would understand these cometary matters much more deeply than I, because he has actually

THE TREE THAT GREW FROM THE SKY

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

Illustration by Janet Aulisio

sailed across those dark seas of the night where the stars have their homes, and I have only looked up into them from below and wrestled with the gods for answers to my questions. During his years among us I have had many conversations with the Alien and he has taught me a great deal, but beyond doubt there will always be much more that I could learn from him.

At the moment there is, however, the problem of gaining access to him. He has been in a foul, sour mood for weeks now — ever since the coming of the comet, in fact — sequestering himself, allowing no guests to come to him. The maze in which he dwells not only pens him in but keeps outsiders from entering unbidden. Since the comet came to take on its full brilliance we have sometimes seen him emerge at night, pacing high up along the inner wall of his enclosure with his face turned toward the sky, as well he might, for the comet is an extraordinary sight and he has few diversions in the course of his daily life. But on those occasions he has taken no notice of us; and when my daughter Thehane went to visit him the day before yesterday, as she so often has, he turned her angrily from the gate, even her, his one true friend.

These moods have come to him often during his time among us, though not often with such intensity as at the present time. He has an angry heart, our Alien does. The burning poison of incurable loneliness and homesickness has spread through his veins in these fifteen years of his captivity.

The Alien fascinates me. His mere presence among us tells me that the sky is full of worlds, and those worlds are peopled, and some of those peoples go to and fro among the stars as easily as I would go from Kevron to Stot, from Stot to Shagroot, from Shagroot to Kinpoil. That is a miracle to me. We thought we were alone in the universe until the Alien came. Now we see the folly of that belief. I do, at least.

How I would love to know all the things he knows! His head must be full of ideas and concepts never even dreamed of by us, and what great wonders I might accomplish if I could call upon those ideas myself! His knowledge added to mine would allow me to achieve things never before attempted.

Nevertheless, I should not be too disparaging of my gifts or my accomplishments. My own mind, on its own, is far from a trivial thing. It is able to meet most intellectual tasks with distinction. I look, I see; I think; I comprehend. And so I understand this visitor star, and therefore it does not frighten me.

But the people will believe what they will believe, and how can I make them listen to me? I have never been able to make them listen to me. They respect me, yes. They employ my services and value my skills, yes. But to listen, when I tell them things?

No.

They will believe what they will believe. And the visitor star frightens them. The wide plain west of the city is bright with the fires of ghazul trees that they have set alight as offerings to the gods. They burn a tree to Mالد, and nevertheless the visitor star draws ever nearer, and so they burn a tree to Kleyaz, and one to Hagna, and one to Gamirion, and still it comes toward us.

The ghazul trees are rare and very beautiful, and their sweet oil is precious for its seventy uses. It is a pity to waste them this way.

But the people will believe, and their beliefs make them afraid.

What can I do? Let them believe.

the maze that I built as the Alien's habitation and prison — but it is the largest and most magnificent. Still, the Citadel's design is not without a cleverness of its own. Outside, it is massive and grand. The great sloping walls of greenish-black stone, the enormous gray exterior columns that support the heavy blue-tiled roof, the awesome life-like images of gods and goddesses that I spent four years carving with my own hands in high relief on the western facade. All these testify to the power and might of the dynasty that has governed us these nine hundred years past.

But once you are within the building, all is twisting and undulating and sly, and that testifies to the subtlety and vision of Kell the Artificer, who is the only man in the world who could have conceived such things. I am divine Tulsabarasha's creature, he who is the builder of palaces for his fellow gods, and he, who is by far the most skillful of all the godly ones in the making of things, the Artificer of Artificers, has shared his understanding with me in generous measure.

The king was waiting for me in the Throne-Room of the Equinox. That is the long, open hall on the second story at the palace's eastern end, facing the sea. There is a day in the spring every year when the sun in its northward journey crosses the celestial equator, and a day every autumn when it crosses that equator again going in the other direction, and on both of those days the hours of light and the hours of darkness are exactly equal. I have positioned the throne in that Throne-Room in such a way that at the moment of the equinoctial crossing a long shaft of golden-red sunlight penetrates the room and strikes a polished bronze pommel that rises above the center of the throne.

That was an easy enough effect to calculate; but King Thalk for whom I built the Citadel was so overwhelmed by his first sight of it that he paid me a bonus of five thousand pieces of gold, and King Hai-Theldon his son sent himself on the throne a day or two prior to the moment of the light-beam's semi-annual advent, for fear it might come early some year and he would miss it. And there he sits for hour after hour every spring and every autumn, despite my having advised him that it is not necessary to do so, until Mالد has indeed hurled his golden shaft against the consecrated sphere of bronze.

I loved old King Thalk, but I have no great fondness for King Hai-Theldon, his son. He was lazy and arrogant and unintelligent when he was a boy and I was his tutor; and though he is far from lazy now that he is king, he is still arrogant and unintelligent. Since he has kept those latter two qualities into his adult years, I wish he had kept his laziness as well: He would do less harm that way.

He was standing right at the brink of the Throne-Room's open side when I entered, hands clasped behind his back, head hunched forward, staring upward into the sky. One good shove from behind would have sent him down into the Living Sea. But I lack the blind courage of the assassins.

"Kell?" he said, without turning.

"I hail and obey, Majesty," I said, and made the formal gesticulation of submission even though he was not looking my way. Now that he is king, he demands these formalities and I am careful not to forget that. It was once easier between him and me. For many years I called him "Choyin," which was his father's pet name for him, after his fancied resemblance to the little glassy-legged serpent of the

Great Central Desert. If I dared to use that name for him now he would probably lock me up for the rest of my days in the maze where the Alien lives.

Still not deigning to glance at me, he beckoned with a flick of his hand. I came up close, and impatiently he ordered me closer yet, right to the edge. Red waves of dizziness swept through me, but I took up my place right beside him at the brink and clamped my two long anchor-toes tightly around the stone rim. My loom-sense is keener than most — too keen, perhaps — and therefore I have some fear of edges. To soar through the air like a bird

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MONTH, ON A night when no moons were in the sky and the visitor star blazed out against the darkness like a river of light, the king sent word to me that I was to come to him in the Citadel, the great hilltop palace overlooking the Living Sea that I built for his father long ago, and explain to him the meaning of what was happening in the sky.

It always gives me great pleasure to behold the Citadel. It is not the cleverest of my buildings — the cleverest one is



would afford me intense delight, I like to think, but standing at the very edge of a steep drop makes me queasy. Still, I forced myself.

Just below us lay the rolling strangeness of the Living Sea, which, to be accurate, is not exactly a sea at all, but rather an immense, quivering, pudding-like lake of a pale pink substance that is thicker than water but thinner than mud. It stretches eastward from this shore as far as anyone can imagine. Some say it goes halfway around the world.

I have studied it for many years: I know that it is a live creature, a single tremendous entity that has some sort of intelligent mind, though of what quality that intelligence is not even I can say. By day and by night a flickering pink radiance rises from it, and warmth. The people believe that anyone who enters it will instantly die.

Despite the competing brightness that came from the sea, the visitor star stood out clearly and vividly against the dark moonless sky.

The reason why the people spoke of it as a "tree" was obvious even to me, for the tail that played out behind it across much of the sky was particularly long and thick, indeed somewhat like the trunk of a tree, and terminated in a multitude of twisted curling streamers of light that could be construed as bearing some resemblance to a tree's roots. Ignorant but imaginative folk might well think that what they saw was a great, tapering, narrow-headed tree tumbling crown-foremost toward the world.

"This new star," said the king. "Is it a tree or is it a comet, Kell?"

"A comet that looks something like a tree, Majesty."

"A comet. You're certain of that?"

"A very bright and large comet, yes. A thing of dust and ice that comes out of the cold distant darkness trailing a white stream of light, crosses our course in the heavens, and vanishes again back into the darkness from which it came."

"No comets are seen when a poor man dies, but the fall of kings is blazoned in the skies," he intoned, in that dreadful, pumped-up, over-theatrical way that I had never succeeded in persuading him to abandon. "You know those lines, Master Kell?"

"They are from my play *Heyold the Bold*, Sire." He had quoted the passage with uncharacteristic accuracy.

"Yes. The wise old man Vithak speaks them. And then the young wizard Greyborn replies, 'Comets, aye! Famine and pestilence pour down from them like rain from a cloud.' The fall of kings, Kell. Famine and pestilence." He still had not looked at me so much as once. His voice was hollow, sepulchral. "If your poetry has any truth to it, Master Kell, the coming of this comet means that the realm is in great danger."

"My poetry is only poetry. My play is just a play."

"All just a fabric of lies, is it, this great masterpiece of yours that you forced me to commit to memory down to its final word?"

"The play in its totality is a thing of wisdom and truth, Majesty. But it is the sum of its differing parts. Individual characters speak according to their individual ways of thinking, and those are not necessarily ones with which the author agrees. Old Vithak believes that comets are omens of evil, and so does the young wizard Greyborn. But the era in which they purportedly lived was long ago, when men were ignorant. It is a mistake to think that Kell the Master of Sciences, who created Vithak and Greyborn and put those words in their mouths, believes everything that they happen to believe."

"So I am mistaken, am I, Kell?"

There was an ominous tone in his voice. The king is slight of build, and I am a heavy-set man, but it would have been easy enough for him to fling me into the sea with one petulant push. I found myself won-

dering if I would try to take him with me if he did.

"It is not a useful policy to interpret the words of characters in a play as statements of scientific verities," I said carefully. "Poetry is poetry and science is science."

"You are both a scientist and a poet, Kell. I have always assumed that your poetry is scientific."

"That is not a safe thing to assume, Majesty."

He was silent for a time, considering that. Then he said, "Is this comet going to crash into us, do you think?"

"It will pass to the north and east, traveling toward the Sun, and leave us in peace."

"Am I to take that answer as science or poetry, Kell?"

"I have made observations every night since the comet appeared in the sky. It grows larger, yes, but also it travels upward and outward. Last week it was there; tonight it is here; next week it will be there." I pointed far to the northeast.

"Unless it decides to smash through the roof of this Citadel instead, and kill the king, and bring famine and pestilence to the world, as your wise men say in that play of yours."

"Comets make no decisions, Majesty. They follow the inexorable laws of nature. Just as a river will not suddenly decide to flow uphill, this comet will not decide to turn from its path and descend into our midst."

"The people think it will. I've sent men out into the city to listen to what they say. They think that the comet is a great tree that Kleyz has placed in the sky, or perhaps it was Hayna who put it there, and it grows downward from the heavens all the time, getting bigger and heavier, and eventually its roots will lose their hold on the sky and it will drop upon us in a terrible catastrophe. That is what they believe."

"I know that. But believing a thing doesn't make it so."

"But what am I to do, Kell?"

"About their beliefs? Very little can be done about those, I would expect. Go before them and tell them that their fears are needless, that the visitor star cannot possibly do us any —"

"Any harm, yes," he cut in, drawing the words derisively, before I could finish the sentence. "And next you will say that time will prove me right and the people will rejoice. Fine. And if the comet falls upon us anyway, what then?"

"Why, then, we will all be dead. But it is not going to happen."

"You are the great artificer, Kell. You are Talastartha's own likeness come to dwell among us. Fashion something for me that will blow this thing, this tree, this comet, from the skies before it can do any injury to us. Some great projectile hurled from a mighty catapult, for example, that will shatter it into a million harmless fragments."

"That is not only unnecessary, Sire — I can show you mathematical proof that the comet will pass us by — it also happens to be impossible."

"A word you rarely use," he said, and laughed.

"But appropriate in this case."

"How am I to trust these mathematical proofs of yours? What if they mean no more than the words of the characters in your play?"

"We could get the Alien out of his prison and question him about these matters. He has traveled between the stars; very likely he has seen comets journeying in their courses; he will know the law by which they must abide. And they will be exactly as I have told you they are."

"The Alien," said the king moodily. "I should take him out of that maze and have his throat cut on the high altar."

I gave him a look of horror. "Sure?"

We could get the Alien out of his prison and question him about these matters.

"I've felt since I was a boy that letting him live among us is dangerous. The place he comes from is one where the gods we love are unknown. He owes them no allegiance, indeed probably denies their very existence. His coddled existence here is a mockery in their faces. For fifteen years they've waited for us to destroy him; and, since we don't do it, they've hurled this tree at him to do the job. The fact that the tree will smash us up too is unimportant to them, I suppose."

"A comet, Sire. Not a tree."

"Whatever. If it should collide with the world —"

"It will not. And the Alien is a poor, stranded wayfarer whose life among us is a misery of loneliness. He is here through no choice of his own, but while he is here he is our guest, and guests are sacred. If you were to kill him, the gods might indeed be annoyed enough to hurt something our way. I beg you, Majesty, put all thought of sacrificing him out of your mind."

"Well —"

"And your fears as well. No harm will come to us from this comet."

"Well," he said again. "Perhaps so, Master Kell."

I BACKED MOST HUMBL Y AND PROPERLY out of the royal presence then, even though the king still stood with his face turned from me, looking outward to the sky, and made my way through the splendors of the palace that I had so cunningly built for his father — through the Room of Nine Metals, and past the Pool of Nine Waters, and down the spiral staircase that I had fashioned so that it drills like an auger into the Nine Levels of the world's core, far below the Citadel itself. It may be blasphemy to say so, but

the divine Tulanaratha, by whose grace I have attained all my skills, could not have done better. And then I passed beneath the bronze dragons with which I had bedecked the Lesser Gate and was outside in the night, and saw the comet hanging overhead, a dazzling shaft of cool white fire in the sky, bright as the sword of Gamridon.

The king's anxieties had been allayed, for the moment, and all was well.

But with Hai-Thekion all was never well for long. He is just intelligent enough to be restless of mind, but not sufficiently intelligent to know when he is putting that restlessness to a foolish purpose. It is hard for him to hold to a steady course. Would he think once again, tomorrow, that it was a good idea to have me build a catapult with which to destroy the comet as it hovers above us? Would he begin toying again with the notion of sacrificing the Alien as an offering to the angry gods? Or sacrificing me, for that matter, if the panic among the common folk continued to grow? I am more useful to him than any ten thousand of them could ever be; but logic has never prevented kings from acting against their own best interests. They usually have the luxury of surviving their mistakes and continuing as before. I though, have only one life.

Cautious though I was of my own conclusions concerning the comet, I resolved to check and recheck all my calculations to make absolutely certain that this comet, unusually big as it is, would behave like all previous ones known to history and swing past the world at a comfortable distance. A conversation on that subject with the Alien would be in order, too, I thought. I have, and never have made any secret about it, high regard for my own powers of mind; but I am wise enough to know that I am not infallible. That is one of the ways in which I am different from a king.

I was positive that the comet would not hit us. But what if it came very close, much closer than I expected it to, and swept like an avenging scimitar above the tops of our tallest buildings? The people would doubtless go berserk. In their terror they would surely burn the city and perhaps try to kill the king; and the king, as the wild mobs approached the Citadel, very likely would turn his anger on me.

So my figures had to be utterly trustworthy. If I saw any possibility of error in them, it would probably behoove me to disappear from the capital until the comet had passed by, or even, perhaps, to seek permanent service with some other king. There are many who would have me, and gladly.

I would set to work on my recalculations at once, that very night.

The quickest route from the Citadel to the compound where I have my observatory and workshop passes through the Great Plaza of the Kings. That is where the Tower of the Alien, which long ago had carried its lone passenger across the great sea of suns to our world, had made its landing on the astounding day when it came hurtling down through the sky, and that was where it had stood ever since, precisely in the center of the plaza, on the grassy lawn where King Mosa-Bodrik slew his fifty brothers in the time of the myths. The grass for a considerable distance around it was badly charred, but has long since grown back. "How I marvel at the elegant way you came down in the one open space in the midst of our city without harming a thing," I told the Alien once; to which he replied, not at all flattered, "Elegant? It was outrageous idiocy. I had no business landing in the city at all. But the ship was out of control and I was doing the best I could. It was just blind luck that I didn't kill fifty thousand people."

The Tower has never ceased to fascinate me. It summons for me a deep and shivering sense of the vastness and wondrousness of the universe; and never had I crossed the Great Plaza of the Kings without pausing a moment or two to stare at it in awe. And, sometimes, not simply to stare; on many occasions I had actually entered it, clambering up the winding staircase within it in order to study the array of mysterious devices in the cabin at its summit. No one else, to my

knowledge, ever went into it. No one would dare. They utterly baffled me, those devices. But just as one will probe with one's tongue at a sore tooth, so had I gone back again and again into the Tower to stare in bewilderment at those perplexing banks of mechanisms. I am not accustomed to bewilderment, nor to perplexity. Solutions to problems, even the hardest ones, have a way of presenting themselves to me, after a time. But not these. The devices in the Tower were alien mechanisms and the problems they offered were alien problems; and my mind, for all its versatility, is deeply rooted in the things of this world.

This night the Tower seemed more wondrous even than usual. Rust, over the years, has flecked its battered metal skin with a coating of brilliant colors, ochre and auburn and scarlet and emerald, but now, lit by the comet's white glare, it had taken on a whole host of unfamiliar and wonderful new hues.

As I stood then before it there leaped into my mind's eye the thought of making a painting of what I beheld at that moment, the comet splitting the sky with its light and the Tower beneath it all ablaze with the colors engendered by the reflection of that light. It would be a considerable challenge to reproduce the myriad interwoven coruscating tones of the Tower and the cool contrasting brilliance of the comet with mere pigment on canvas; but when had I ever turned away from challenge?

There was, however, no time for making paintings just now. So that night I merely watched entirely around it, briefly stopping several times to admire the eerie starlit beauty of its patina, and after a few moments of that I went on my way.

When I reached my observatory I made that night's measurements and etched them on the screen that gives me my comparative locations of the comet; and I saw that it had continued to move in the direction in which I believed it should be traveling, and at the requisite velocity. I held up to the sky the instrument that tells me the size of heavenly objects, and saw that the tail had once more extended its length. This, too, was completely in accordance with my prediction.

Then I took out the calculating machine that I had fabricated

from strips of reed and silvers of copper wire, and went through all my numbers from the very first, plotting the actual course of the comet across the sky against my original predictions of them. And I confirmed, to my great satisfaction, that I had been correct at every step.

These things took me all night. Just before dawn Theliane came to me, sleepy and puzzled-looking, a candle in her hand.

"Father? I awoke and saw a light in here. Is there anything wrong?"
"Only in King Hal-Theklon's head," I answered. "He's been reading old plays of mine and something he found in one of them made him start to think the comet was going to hit us after all. So I've been rechecking my calculations. It's taken me a while. The figures are right."

Of Hal-Theklon's notion of putting the Alien to death to propitiate angry gods, I said nothing. I knew of the deep love she bore for that creature from another world. And I suspected that Hal-Theklon, like his father before him, both dreaded and to some degree revered the Alien, and would not dare to harm him, so why arouse needless apprehension in her?

"Only he would doubt that your figures are right!" she said indignantly. "But it does seem so close, all the same. And constantly getting closer. I can see why he'd be worried. The whole city's mattering, you know."

"It isn't close at all," I said.

"It isn't?"

"When the comet comes into the sky each night, it's in approximately the same place as the night before, right? It's moved a little to the north, a little to the east, but you still see the same stars in the background behind it, Ligor, Izka, Semilgat, Vroz. Yes?"

"Well — yes."

"The world turns, and the comet goes out of view as morning nears, and the next night it's back again. Ligor, Izka, Semilgat, Vroz. Whereas the moons, which everybody agrees are very close to us, go whizzing across the sky from horizon to horizon. If the position of the comet against the background of the stars doesn't change very much, it must be farther away than the moons, is that not so? A good deal farther, as a matter of fact. And no one worries about the moons colliding with us. Nor should we worry about the comet. It's well out there in space, and though it's going to get closer to us before it starts going away, it's not going to hit us. I promise you that, Theliane. There are laws that all comets obey — laws not made by kings, but by the gods themselves — and this comet will behave the way all the others have."

"So it's definitely a comet, then, and not some kind of gigantic tree that's dropping down on us?"

"Theliane!"

"Did I say something stupid again, father? You know I'm not really stupid. But I suppose to you everybody, even someone with a reasonable amount of intelligence, must seem not much better than a moron."

"Hardly so," I told her.

And I scarcely need observe that Theliane was not stupid at all: simply not a genius. Not being a genius is no sin, though, or the priests would be busy kindling absolution offerings all day and all night. But Theliane's mind was agile enough, as the minds of ordinary folk go, and her beauty was so remarkable that I often wondered how such a creature as she could have come from the loins of one like me.

I must concede, however, that I had assistance in the fashioning of her. In the distribution of parental traits Theliane may have received only a portion of her father's boiling intelligence, but a full measure of her mother's beauty. Better that, I suppose, than the other way around; and had she been given intellectual gifts on a par with her physical ones, the gods would have had to destroy her out of sheer envy.

She said, peering through the observatory

window at the paling sky, from which the comet had vanished some hours before, "Do you know, father, I wish that it really was a tree with a great solid trunk, and that it would come close enough for me to climb up into it."

"You do? You would?"

One other trait of mine that had not been inherited by her was my overriding caution.

"Wouldn't you, father? No, perhaps you wouldn't. But I'd do it in a flash. It must be half as big as the world, wouldn't you say? And I'd climb right to the top of it. Imagine the view from up there! All the stars at once, and moons that no one can see from down here. And the other planets practically within my reach. Just stretch out my arm, like this — and touch —"

She laughed. Her eyes were bright with yearning. She was twenty years old, and still had a child's eager desire to enfold the universe in her arms.

"It's not a tree," I said. "And 99 percent of what you see up there is nothing but a bright stream of gas. You'd have a hard time climbing that."

"That's too bad," she said. "If I could, I would. Maybe somehow I will."

I smiled and set about putting my instruments away, and she, perhaps already beginning to plan the scheme that would cause me so much grief, went off to bring me my morning meal. She was always solicitous in that way. None of my wives ever cared for me the way Theliane did. I have had no luck in my choice of women, not even once, except that one of them, sullen and cold though she was, gave me Theliane.

As she spread the food bowls before me I said to her, "I need to talk with the Alien. But he's been so peculiar, lately. You said he wouldn't let even you visit him the other day."

The Alien had always regarded Theliane with great warmth, ever since she was a small child. There is no one in the world who has ever been closer to him than she. He was often surly and curt, but never with her. His skill in our language was something he owed to her, the long hours she had spent cloistered with him in his prison cell across fifteen years. Now that she was grown, she would have become his lover, I suppose, if such a thing had been physically possible between a man of his race and a woman of ours.

"It must be the sky-tree that agitates him so," she said. "The comet, I mean to say. Ever since it first came into view he's been getting edgier and edgier. What can that mean?"

I had no idea. Nor did she. But she promised to try again to get him to allow her through the gate, and to win his permission for me to enter also.

I slept from dawn to mid-morning, which is all the sleep I need. When I awakened, I heard Theliane moving about on the lower level of my chambers, singing prettily to herself as she tidied and dusted. She told me, when I went downstairs to her, that she had been to the Alien, who seemed more calm today; that he had admitted her to the maze in friendly enough fashion; that he was willing to let me speak with him that very afternoon.

I clasped her in my arms and tenderly touched my forehead to hers.

"What would I do without you?" I asked her. "What would I ever do?"

4

THE MAZE OF THE ALIEN, AS I HAVE SAID, is my most ingenious creation. Old King Thak, may the gods ever caress him, told me to spare no expense. To make it a monument that would stand for the ages, a work of wonder that would outlast him and me both and the Alien as well, and by its unique distinction of design and elegance of artifice to announce to all the world in centuries to come that it was our city that had been singled out by the gods to be the home for this extraordinary being from the far stars.

It is a building fashioned out of spirals, a great many of them, some of which go upward and some down. They interlock and overlap in an artful way that dazes the mind: You will be carefully following a downward-sloping spiral that seems to be a direct route inward, and, though you are diligently ignoring the temptations of dead-end side-passages and brightly lit major corridors that clearly go nowhere, it will suddenly occur to you from the effort of your movements that you have somehow ceased to descend and begun to climb a steep ramp, all the while thinking you were continuing down, and that you now are heading toward the perimeter of the maze rather than toward its center. Or you will be under the impression that you are ascending until you find out that you are not, and so forth.

There are, naturally, dozens of passages that double back in short order upon themselves and return you swiftly and mockingly to your starting point. There are some that seem agreeably straightforward until they terminate in impassable walls. There are high-railed galleries flanked with five or six doorways of which two or three appear to lead onward in useful directions, but none of which in fact goes anywhere. And so on and so on, a delicious little city of mysteries. Although many paths will take you easily and encouragingly inward through the outer third of the maze, only a few will carry you very far into the middle third, and only one will bring you to the innermost zone.

I made the maze beautiful, too, though few in our lifetimes would have a chance to appreciate its beauty. The floors of the great galleries are decorated with a host of eerie, little, tapering mounds of carved white stone, much like the stalagmites one finds in caves. From certain angles they have the look of animals, or people, or gods; but then when you walk around to the other side of them they become incomprehensible lumps of shapeless rock, and you wonder how you could have recognized any sort of form in them whatever.

Then there are chambers where I built canopies and draperies all of a much finer white stone cut with a myriad little openings, so that they have the appearance of the most costly of woven fabrics, and also I constructed reflecting pools and walls that have the gleam of mirrors, and long, mysterious openings in the ceilings of the lower rooms that seem to look upward into other worlds, and many another decorative feature that gives evidence of my skill as an artificer. And the entire structure is run through with ventilating pipes and concealed sources of illumination, all of the most artful inventiveness. I also designed a system of speaking-tubes by which those outside the maze can communicate with the Alien, and be with us. There is nothing like these tubes anywhere else in the world, not even at the king's own Citadel.

The apartments of the Alien are at the very center of all this, and they are comfortable enough, essentially the sort of lodging one might provide for a prince of the royal house. His spacious rooms are arranged on five levels, forming a discrete structure within the structure that rises up like a thrusting arm through the heart of the maze and culminates in a flat peak surrounded by an open circular gallery, thus giving him a lofty promenade where he can enjoy a fresh-air stroll, or look outward on the joyous light of day and the brilliance of the stars. It is possible to see him from outside the wall of the maze when he appears on his balcony, a distant tiny figure outlined against the sky, and when he does so appear the people often gather to peer at him, though by this time he is far from a novelty here.

I used six different sub-architects to build the maze, and each one employed his own team of workmen; and no members of any team were given any knowledge of the plans that the other five groups

were following. As a result, no one understands the secret of how to reach the inner apartments, except for three people. I am one and the king is another — Thalk insisted on that — and the third is the official known as the Guardian of the Alien, who is the blind eunuch Kataphrazes. I taught Kataphrazes the route myself, placing his probe-fingers on each key landmark along the way until he knew them all by touch-memory. His sense of touch is exceedingly powerful, very likely because of his blindness: He was amazingly quick to master the correct path and was able almost at once to make his way through the passages errorlessly and with unfaltering step.

Each morning Kataphrazes leads the servitors who bring the Alien his food to the inner barrier, never taking the same approach twice the same month, nor using the same servitors. If the Alien is to have guests, Kataphrazes will lead them inward in the same ever-varying fashion, and they are blindfolded besides, more for the theatrical pomp of the thing than as a real precaution, for nobody could ever learn the way simply by observing it just one single time.

There is a fourth who knows the route, and it is Theliane. With King Thalk's permission I taught it to her when she was a child, at her urgent request, for there was little I would ever refuse Theliane.

The Alien's inner apartments are surrounded by a gated wall of sharp-tipped iron spars: The Alien alone has control over who passes through that gate. It is a little privilege that we bestowed on him to preserve the fiction that he is our guest, not our prisoner. When he feels gloomy and withdrawn, which is often, he denies entry to those who desire access to him, and so be it.

In any event he does not ordinarily have many visitors other than Theliane, who has been by far his most frequent guest, and myself; until his recent spell of unsociability I had gone to him every few weeks, and we had enjoyed long, far-ranging talks about the nature of the world and the cosmos. Other than us, he has had little company. The four high priests of the city pay him ceremonial calls every now and then, since he is regarded officially as an emissary from the gods. For the same reason King Thalk used to go to him every month or two; King Hsi-Thelkon,

though, finds him troublesome to look upon, indeed, downright hideous, and I think has entered the maze no more than twice in the five years of his reign. And sometimes high priests from other cities, when their travels bring them to us, are taken by Kataphrazes to see the Alien, by way of reminding them that his presence among us confers on us the status of a city honored above all others in the world.

It was months since I had last visited the Alien and this day, when I went to him, I was startled by the changes in his appearance. He is, obviously, not very much like us in form, other than in such superficial ways as having two legs on which he stands upright, and two arms, and a head set between his shoulders to bear his eyes and breathing-holes and mouth. I have long since grown accustomed to all the little oddities of his appearance, the flatness of his face, and the fact that his fingers are more or less all of the same size and so are his toes, and that his skin is pale and soft, and that his head is shaped the way it is and his eyes are the color and shape that they are, and so forth and so forth.

But the fur atop his head, which had changed its color from black to gray in the past few years, now seemed suddenly much more sparse than I remembered. I found that pleasing; it made him seem less like a beast of the fields. His face looked broader, as though the soft flesh of it were spreading and sagging. His flat inhuman eyes had a new look that seemed to me to speak not merely of the sadness of his soul but of a deep, inescapable weariness. Even his posture was

The Alien's inner apart- ments are surrounded by a gated wall of sharp-tipped iron spars...

different, his shoulders now slumping forward as if he found it an increasing effort to stand erect.

"Well, what do you expect, Kell?" he said, as I stood there gaping at him while he opened the gate that gave admission to his private apartments. There was an abruptness in his tone, a whiplash rhythm, that I knew connoted anger. "Do you think I'm going to look the same way forever? I've spent a quarter of my entire life living in this labyrinth of yours. And now I'm starting to get old."

I had not said a thing, only stared. He often responds to unspoken statements that way, as though he can see into your mind and read your hidden thoughts.

For a long while I wondered whether the Alien might actually have that ability; since he has little or no horn, perhaps other senses of his are correspondingly hyper-keen. But later I realized that he merely has a highly developed capacity for interpreting facial expressions. It is, I suppose, a skill that his race cultivates and we do not, though I have given some effort to mastering it since learning from him that one can discover a great deal about the thoughts of others simply by studying their faces while they speak to you.

I told him that I knew that something had been troubling him lately that had caused him to shun my company and that of my daughter, and I asked whether it could be this, the onset of age, the distress that that was causing in him.

He merely lifted his shoulders a little way at that and turned his hands outward, the gesture he calls a "shrug," which is meant to convey indifference.

Why, he asked, did I think that growing old would be upsetting to him? To the contrary: The older he became, the closer he was to dying, and death for him meant only the end of captivity, the end of exile.

To these words I made no direct reply. They had been spoken in a flat, emotionless way that seemed to me to connote just as much anger as his earlier harshness. And I could see from his stance and a certain look about his mouth and eyes that he was speaking insincerely. A long silence prevailed between us.

"Is it the coming of the visitor star, then?" I asked, finally.

"You mean the comet?"

"Yes. I've seen you on the roof gallery, staring at it for hours."

"Well, why not? It's a colossal sight, a comet that brilliant. I've never seen one quite that grand. But what would be troublesome to me about a comet?" He had reached his sitting-room now. In shelves on every wall were the multitude of things we had brought to him from his Tower; his books, his entertainment-cubes, the various machines with which he looks after his medical needs, and so forth. We are a civilized nation; we had tried to make his captivity as tolerable as possible. He beckoned me to my usual seat and said, "Do you people know what comets are, Kell? — You understand that they aren't actually stars, don't you?"

"We call them 'visitor stars,' but only because they are so conspicuous and move so much faster than true stars. But we know that comets are different from stars in some way, or we would not have the other word for them. For my own part, I think a comet is more like a little planet, is that not so?"

"Bravo, Kell! A little planet, yes! One that travels around and around the solar system just as the big planets do, only in a much more eccentric orbit."

"But the big planets will endure for all eternity," I said. "Comets must eventually exhaust their substance and disappear, or else faller in their orbits and tumble into the Sun."

"You know that much, do you, Kell?"

"Am I not correct?" I asked him.

I knew that I was, but I was holding my breath all the same while awaiting confirmation from him. And I was leaning forward in the posture of expectation, pupil to master. Thirty years had gone by since I had last adopted that posture toward any person of my own species; but when in the company of the Alien I usually found myself taking such a stance within a matter of moments. He said, "I've read your textbooks of astronomy. They're full of myth and fantasy."

"My ideas do not come from textbooks, but rather from direct observation of the phenomena."

"Ah, Kell, Kell, you're a special one, aren't you? Then tell me: Why is it that you think comets will — what did you say? — exhaust their substance and disappear?"

"Because," I said, "they seem to be small hard balls of solid matter with a great cloak of light streaming out behind them. That cloak grows brighter and longer as the comet approaches the Sun. What else can it be, but the comet's own substance, boiling forth from it in the form of gas as the Sun's energy heats it? That substance can never be replaced, and so the comet must inevitably dwindle with each of its journeys around the sun, until there is nothing left of it."

I knew from the gleam of approval in his eyes that what I was saying was correct. Not that I had had any serious doubt of it.

"And as for how I know that the comets travel around the Sun like planets, why, I have consulted the records. Not all of our astronomy is myth and fantasy, Alien. There are comets that have come back again and again, always at regular intervals for many centuries, and thus must be locked into permanent orbits as planets are. One comet has come every fifty years, one every sixty-two, and so on. It is in the records."

He pointed toward the ceiling. "This one, too?"

"Not this one. It has never been seen by us before."

"Causing great excitement out there, is it?"

"The people find it terrifying. They're afraid that it's going to collide with us and destroy the world. It looks like a tree to them, a huge tree that's falling from the sky, perhaps as a

manifestation of the anger of the gods against us. I know that they're wrong, but when an irrational idea like that takes possession of people's minds, nothing I could say or do will lift it from them. They'll simply have to wait and see that nothing bad is going to happen."

"It's a lonely business, isn't it, Kell, to be as smart as you are?"

I imitated his shrug gesture. "I have adapted to it. I will accept the loneliness, if that's the price of the intelligence."

"And you aren't completely lonely. Apparently you've managed to find a wife, at any rate."

"I have had several wives. What I have never had is a mate."

He considered that for a moment.

"You've been blessed with a wonderful daughter, at least," he said, after a little while.

"So I have, yes. I thank the gods for her each day."

We fell into another spell of silence.

Then the Alien said, "Some comets do collide with planets, you know."

"They do?"

"It's been known to happen. For one thing, their orbits are dynamically unstable. Gravitational perturbations can make changes in a comet's path as it travels, and send it heading off on a collision course with something nearby. Do you know what I'm talking about, Kell? And even without that happening, the fact remains that the orbits of comets cross those of the planets. It's altogether possible, sooner or

later, for a comet and a planet to arrive at the same place at the same time as they make their separate orbital journeys around the Sun."

"This comet will not hit us," I said.

The Alien made his alien equivalent of a smile. "You say that with absolute confidence."

"I feel absolute confidence."

"Yes. It's the mark of a superior mind, isn't it? But also the mark of a completely closed and rigid one."

"I have calculated the orbit of this comet. Bright and large as it is, it will pass by us at a safe distance."

"I'd like to see those calculations," he said.

"I have brought them with me," I told him, and presented my portfolio of nightly observations.

That amused him, that I should be so well prepared for this discussion. For what seemed like a very long time he looked through my pages of notes, whistling occasionally, tapping the tips of his stubby little fingers against his teeth. I will not say that I felt serious self-doubt during this time, for I was sure that I had done my calculations properly; but I am not so foolish as to think I am a perfect being, and, as I have already said, this man's knowledge of the stars and heavens must by definition be greater than mine, because he has had direct experience of interstellar travel. So I allowed for the possibility that he would find some qualitative error in my assumptions, something that stemmed not from my observations and calculations (which I knew to be correct) but from some lack of understanding in me of the fundamental workings of the universe. Then he looked up and said, "Very nice, Kell. You never cease to astonish me."

"The savage who walks on his hind legs once more demonstrates his unexpectedly capable mind, eh?"

"Don't be sarcastic. I feel great affection for you, do you know that? We're two of a kind, you and I. You're nearly as much out of place here as I am."

A curious remark. But I saw the truth in it, and I could not help but be flattered.

We talked then for a time about the nature of comets. He confirmed much that I had discovered on my own, and told me a few things I had not known, such as the existence of great swarms of comets at the outer edges of most solar systems, millions and millions of them clustering together far beyond the outermost planets. Only a few of these comets, he said, ever detach themselves from their fellows and undertake journeys past the inner worlds. Which explained to me why, since the world is at least half-a-million years old and perhaps very much older than that, there still are comets for us to see. The ones our remote ancestors saw have long since evaporated and vanished, but there are always new ones breaking loose from that enormous population of them out beyond the orbit of the farthest planet and coming our way.

We became silent yet again, after we had talked awhile.

Then abruptly he said, "What I told you when you arrived was untrue. The thing that's been troubling me is the comet."

His sudden reversal mystified me. "It is? And why is that?"

"I don't mean that it's the comet itself that's troublesome to me. As I told you, it's the most spectacular one I've ever seen, an extraordinary thing, and so I've been up there looking at it most nights like everybody else. But I'm not like everybody else. When I look up at the comet, I also see the stars."

"Ah."

"I've tried not to think about the stars, Kell. Or the planets that go around them. Especially the one I came from."

"I see," I said.

"My native star isn't visible from this hemisphere, anyway. But, all the same, when I look toward the heavens —"

"I understand."

The terrible anguish of his solitude leaped out at me like a beacon-light shining from his flat, alien eyes.

I tried, as I had tried a million times before, to imagine what his home world was like, the world he had left so long ago and never would see again. To me it seemed outlandish, fantastic, even frightening. But to him it was home.

He had described it all to me again and again, so that I sometimes could almost make myself believe I had been there myself. But I knew that that was a delusion. I had no real idea of the nature of his world. I never would. My mind stretches farther than that of anyone I have ever known; but the home world of the Alien would always be inconceivably other to me. Those myriad flat-faced people; the remarkable green trees; the unthinkable bizarre animals; the vast seas of blue-green water. A host of great cities, each one made up of buildings taller than our mountains, and having more people in it than we have on our entire world; machines beyond my comprehension, machines that sent pictures instantly from continent to continent, machines that enable one to fly from one planet to another and one star to another, all manner of miraculous machines.

They were like gods, those people, if his tales of his home world had any truth to them.

He said, "This was supposed to be a three-year exploratory mission. Three of my years — that's only two of yours. Come out, look around, go home, and file my report. Equipment failure wasn't part of the mission plan. Neither was shipwreck. Neither was capture and imprisonment by an alien species."

"You are not our prisoner. You are our guest."

"Spare me the sophistry, Kell. We know each other too well for that. Sweet old King Thulk was well aware that the priests would hang his skin on the balcony of his palace if he let me get away from here, because I am the messenger of the gods, and so long as I'm here, the gods will smile on your city. How that fits together with the notion that the gods

are currently in the process of dropping a celestial tree on your city because I'm a resident in it is not something that needs close examination, is it? — Kell, I'm not going to live forever. I want to go home."

The last few words came forth in a desperate blurt.

I ached for him. I am not a man of stone.

But I said, "You know that that's impossible."

"Is it? I thought 'impossible' is a word that isn't in your vocabulary."

"There is a difference between things that are merely difficult to accomplish and things that cannot be accomplished at all."

"Yes, I know. But this one isn't of that sort." He gave me a curious look, fierce and sharp, like winter lightning out of nowhere. In a tone of voice that was oddly constricted, as though a hand had tightened about his throat, he said, "Do you ever go into my ship, Kell?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"I thought you might. What condition is it in, inside?"

I wondered at this. He rarely spoke of his ship; not at all, that I could remember, in several years. "It is as it was. We preserve it with care, as a holy monument. Grown somewhat rusty, perhaps, on the outside —"

"And the inside?"

"As it was on the day you last saw it."

"Sealed, is it, against rain, and insects, and general decay?"

"Sealed, yes."

"The savage who walks on his hind legs once more demon- strates his capable mind."

"Is it, now?" He fixed his gaze on me as though he were pinning me to a board with a dagger. He said, speaking with great precision and clarity in that same tight tone of voice, "It often crosses my mind, Kell, that it might not be difficult to put the ship back into good working order, if it hasn't deteriorated since the time of my landing. And you lead me to think that it hasn't."

Those quiet words rocked me like an earthquake.

Hoarsely I said, "Can that be true?"

"I'm sure of it." The new intensity of his features was truly disturbing. There was a glow about him. It was as though fire streamed from his eyes. "The fundamental mechanisms were still intact when I made my landing. Certain components had broken down, others had become decalcified, but the essential instrumentation was all right. Otherwise I couldn't ever have made my landing. If nothing in it has suffered further damage since I was imprisoned here, it ought to be fixable. You and I, working together, could put everything back together."

It is the comet, I thought, that has aroused these thoughts in him. Awakening yearnings that have long lain dormant within his soul.

"If my ship were to be repaired, I'd be able at the very least to get as far as one of the survey buoys ten or fifteen light-years from here and send a signal that would bring a rescue team to pick me up. And my ship can be repaired, Kell. By you. I'm certain of that."

I said nothing. I could scarcely bear to look at him.

His strange five-fingered hands reached toward me in what could only have been an imploring gesture. They were shaking in agitation. His voice grew louder. "It's not impossible. It isn't! I know what kind of skills you have, Kell. You're one of those amazing universal geniuses who come along maybe every five hundred years in a race's history. No, don't turn your head away like that — you know it's true as well as I do, and this is no moment for false modesty. You're an engineer and an architect, and you have a master artisan's technical abilities and the mind of a great physicist, and you paint and sculpt and write plays and poetry as well, and I don't know how many other things you can do, but the list probably includes just about everything. — Help me escape. Help me, Kell."

I stared at him. I begged him with my eyes not to go on.

But he was merciless. "There's no way you can refuse me. A man like you, Kell, with such a roving, questing, insatiable spirit: it surely can't be hard for you to imagine what it would be like to be locked away like this for the rest of your life!" No, it was not hard at all. I shivered at the thought. But still I did not reply.

He took my silence for assent. The agitation that had taken hold of him subsided somewhat, and his entire posture grew more relaxed. "Well, then. Are we agreed? The two of us, Kell, working side by side, would be able in a matter of months, maybe even only weeks, to —"

"No," I said, at last, and held up my hand to stem the fervid flow of his words. "Wait. Please. No more of this! I told you it isn't possible, and I meant just that."

The light went from his face.

"What would stand in the way?" he asked.

I forced myself to speak calmly. "Allen, you have no comprehension of the realities of the situation. Do you seriously think that we could simply tell the king that you have decided that you would like to go home, whereupon the king would blithely release you from this maze and allow you to instruct me in how to make it possible for you to escape? Why would he be any more willing to do that than his father was?"

"I understand that. But certainly you of all people must know how to get me out of this place. We could go to the ship secretly by night, and —"

"Secretly? Yes. I drag the guards, let us say, and we sneak over there every night and work, and at dawn I bring you back here with no one the wiser. And finally one day the work is done and the ship is fixed and

you get into your Tower and fly away to the stars, and what do you think will happen to me, when you have gone from here? Think, Allen, think! Will the king believe that you escaped from this maze by yourself, by means of some magical conjuration you knew? That you repaired your ship unaided? No, Allen, you will fly away home, and once you are gone I will die the most terrible death that any mind could invent. And that is why I say that what you ask is impossible. You want me to commit suicide for you. That is something I will not do."

5.

ULTIMATELY IT DID NOT GREATLY SURPRISE

him, I suspect, that I was unwilling to help. He knew what risks it would involve for me. But he would have had no peace if he had not asked.

And I had no peace now that he had.

I left him soon afterward. A deep and abiding melancholy had come over me and I needed to be alone. I walked through the streets of the city looking neither to the left nor the right, and responding not at all to such greetings as

came my way, until I had left the paved streets behind and found myself on the earthen path that leads down to the shore of the Living Sea.

Twilight was coming on, now. Two or three of the smaller moons had risen in the eastern sky. I stood beneath the cliff on which the royal Citadel sits, and its long shadow stretched far out before me into the sea.

In the changing light of the waning day the sea itself was taking on its evening colors, a deeper radiance, a stronger pink hue shot through with hints of crimson and aquamarine. The phantasmagorical giant creature that is the Living Sea is more active by night. It stirs and tosses and ripples, small, spiky projections and scalloped turrets rise from its surface and are quickly reabsorbed; little bubbling mouths appear, gape two or three times, and vanish.

I stood for a long while staring intently outward as if somehow I could see across to the mythical lands on its far shore, where the ones we call the Other Folk are said to dwell, those who subsist on nothing but stone and sand, and speak in whistling tones, and sacrifice three thousand wild songbirds to their sun-god every morning. They have a third eye set in the middle of their forehead, so we are told, and dozens of fingers clustering at the ends of their arms, and blue skin pockmarked everywhere with deep circular craters. But who knows if any of these things are true? Nobody in ten thousand years has crossed the Living Sea to visit the Other Folk; and tales ten thousand years old are no more to be trusted than the books we read in our dreams.

Such a great sadness had taken hold of me after my visit to the Allen that for a time I considered giving myself up to the sea then and there. I had felt that temptation often enough before, for I had long been curious about the occult transformative powers the mysterious substance of the sea was rumored to possess, and what better way to understand those powers than to experience them directly?

But this was different. What was surging through me now was a yearning not for knowledge but for oblivion. Perhaps the sea would dissolve and consume me, as everyone believed it would consume any creature foolishly enough to enter it, or perhaps I would simply drown the way one might drown in a lake or river of ordinary water; or maybe the current would carry me eastward, on and on, until at last I came ashore in the land of the Other Folk, who would hail me as a god. Whatever happened, I would be relieved of the feelings of shame and guilt that gripped me now.

But I knew what foolish, useless thoughts those were, and I put them from my mind.

I put, indeed, everything from my mind. I turned myself into a

statue, and stood empty of thought, while the sky grew dark and the long, glowing, tree-shaped streak of white that was the comet came out of the southwest and took up its place high above me. And I remained that way for an hour, or perhaps two, or three, or maybe it was only a couple of minutes.

I must have begun to walk along the shore, after a time, for when consciousness and volition returned to me I found myself far down at the southern end of the beach, where the Tree of Purple Flame stands in its great solitary splendor at the edge of the Living Sea.

It is a marvelous thing, that mighty tree. Its roots go deep down into the bed of the sea and its trunk is a smooth, white, unbranching shaft that rises nearly as high as the cliffs that border the shore. I think the tree is made of sea-stuff too, for strange ghostly purple light emanates from it, and the shadow that it casts is blue, and its great spreading crown is in constant motion, everything writhing, swarming, changing, never the same for a moment. You can see eyes in that writhing crown, faces, beating wings, long serpentine shapes that coil about each other to form intricate knots.

The tree surges and quivers with the constant transformation that is the essence of life. No one that I know of has ever dared to go close to it. Even the shadow that it casts is said to be deadly. But I have pondered that tree ever since I was a boy. To me it is a tree of magic. Now, standing nearer to it than I had ever been before, I pondered its nature yet again, for a time. There I stood, with one strange tree in front of me, another of a very different sort plunging through the dark sky overhead, and gradually my gloom and my pain went from me, and I was myself again, and I turned and went up the steep path that led from the seashore to the town.

A message from the Citadel was waiting for me at my chambers. The king had sent for me again: I was to come at once.

This time I found him not in his usual haunt, the Equinox Throne-Room, but rather in the Grand Council-Hall, which is the great room that occupies most of the third level of the building. That was a disturbing thing in itself, for the Grand Council-Hall is a huge and awesome place, and Hal-Theklon tends to go to it whenever some huge and awesome thought is rattling around in his mind. Which usually presages trouble for me.

He was seated at the far end of the room, which obliged me to walk its entire considerable length before I could make my gesture of obeisance. A great fire was burning in each of the fire-pits down there, so that his kingly grandeur was enhanced by the impressive and dramatic shadows of him that flickered on the blank white wall behind him.

He is fond of that effect. I spent five months painting vivid scenes from the lives of the gods all up and down the other walls of the Grand Council-Hall — I used a process I invented myself, grinding dry pigments into powder and applying them to the wall with a wet brush while the undercoating of freshly applied lime-plaster was still drying, so that the colors would set with the plaster and remain forever bright — but I deliberately left the rear wall unpainted, as though anticipating that King Thak's successor would want to magnify his own importance with this sort of shadow-show. I wonder if Hal-Theklon realizes that.

He said right away, before I could rise from my deep prostration, "I have thought of a way of defending ourselves against the comet, Kell."

"Did I not explain, Sire, that there is no need for —"

He waved me to silence.

"The metal tower, Master Kell, in which the Alien flew from his world to ours — is it not the case that it could be repaired, and made to fly through the heavens once again?"

That stunned me, coming so soon after my conversation on the same subject with the Alien himself.

Fumblingly I said, "Well, Majesty — it may well be that that can be done, but it is just as likely — that is — if the mechanisms that operate it — we know that they were already somewhat damaged when the Alien came, and the passage of time could well have — but — on the other hand — perhaps —"

I have never sounded like such an idiot in all my life.

The king cut severely into my blathering babble. "No matter what the difficulties are, Kell, you can deal with them. I know that you can."

I said, making a desperate effort to recover some fragment of my poise, "I lack your assurance of that, Sire. But possibly — just possibly —" A hopeful, cajoling note came into my voice now. "Perhaps, Majesty, it could be done, yes. If the Alien were allowed to be with me in the Tower as I worked at the repairs — if he were to instruct and direct me, and even to assist me, let us say —"

"No. He must not leave the maze, not now or ever."

"But how, then, will I be able —?"

"He can tell you what must be done, and you can go there and do it, and when you are done the ship will fly again."

I closed my eyes and nodded solemnly. Then after a moment I said, very gently, "And may I ask, Sire, what connection this has with defending ourselves from the comet?"

"Why, that ought to be obvious, Kell! Don't you see, you can cause the ship to go aloft on a course that will send it crashing into the comet. Thus destroying it as it passes overhead, before it can do us any harm!"

He was serious. It was all I could manage to keep from laughing aloud at this grotesque multiplication of absurdities.

But I maintained a certain degree of gravity, and soberly told the king that I would give him plan the most careful consideration; and then I extricated myself from his presence as quickly as I could, before I betrayed my true opinion of his splendid idea.

I hurried home and told Theliane of my conversations with the Alien and the king. She reacted with the greatest excitement and enthusiasm for the project. This, in my folly, I misinterpreted as growing entirely out of her affection for the hapless prisoner in the maze.

The next day I told the Alien also of the king's eagerness to have the ship repaired. The irony of the coincidence amused him greatly. He laughed — it has always seemed remarkable to me that the Alien's way of showing amusement should be so much like our own — and shook his head in a sideways fashion again and again, which is his sign of bemused disbelief. Then he turned his head away from me and put his hands over his face. His shoulders moved in an odd convulsive way, and a low muffled sound came from him, out of his throat and chest, that I had never heard him make before.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"What are you doing?"

He swung around to face me. There was the sheen of fresh moisture on his cheeks, as if some unusual gland had discharged a substance from his eyes.

"Expressing my happiness at the thought of going home," he said.

*What
was surging
through me
was a yearning
not for knowl-
edge but for
oblivion.*

THE COMET GREW EVEN BRIGHTER IN THE days immediately following, so that it seemed to fill half the sky and obscured the light of the stars and the moons.

And as it waxed ever more brilliant overhead, the mood in the city, already sufficiently ugly, turned much uglier still.

Burning ghazul trees as offerings to the gods had been bad enough, I thought; but now the people began burning temples also. The gods, it now was widely declared, had withdrawn their favor from the city, and they must be

informed that we were displeased by that. If they would threaten us with a comet, well, then, we would retaliate by threatening them with the loss of our love. And so there was a serious fire at the House of the Ceremonies and a lesser one, though still very destructive, at the lovely little Shrine of Kleyaz. Two priests of the cult of Hayna were beaten in the streets, and one of them died. The sanctuary of Gamiridon was looted of its treasures by an angry mob. An animal was slaughtered in a sacrilegious way at the foot of the golden statue of Maddaz in Pelathas Square.

I would have told them, if anyone had been willing to listen to me, that the continuing increases in the comet's brightness and apparent size were normal and not at all dangerous. I would have explained to them that the comet had not yet reached its closest point of approach to the world and would grow brighter yet in the days ahead before it grew smaller, but that it was still embarked on a course that would take it safely past us and into the darkness of space again.

But no one was willing to listen to me, nor in any case did I feel much desire to go forth expounding on these matters to those who do not have the capacity to understand them.

Besides, it appeared that going out among the populace would have been dangerous for me. Thelaine reported that she had heard tales circulating in the streets that blamed me, not the gods, for bringing the comet — "the tree," they kept calling it, with idiotic persistence — down upon the world. It was all my fault; supposedly I had engaged in some grandiose scientific experiment that had gone awry, and as a result the "tree" had been pulled toward our world from some other part of the heavens.

"They have started speaking of it as 'Kell's tree,'" Thelaine told me, trembling. I had never seen her show fear before. But it was for me, not herself, that she trembled.

It was easy enough for me to keep out of sight. By day I was safe in the heart of the maze, receiving instruction from the Alien on the location and workings of his ship's controls. And by night I was in the ship itself, striving to find some way of making the vessel functional again.

The first few days there were purely exploratory ones. I made careful sketches of the panels and dials and levers that had puzzled me for so long, and took them to the Alien, who pored over them and tried to identify the role of each piece of equipment and determine whether it still might be capable of operation. Of course he had not been inside the ship for fifteen years, and much had grown unclear to him; but gradually the details started to return to his mind.

It was on the fifth day that I first felt the emotion, unusual to me, of despair. The control mechanisms of the Alien's ship had been defective to some degree in the first place, or he would never have had to make his forced landing here. They had been further damaged

in that very landing, and afterward had suffered fifteen years of natural deterioration; and here was I, a man of a civilization entirely different from the one that had built this ship, trying to undo all those various kinds of damage without any knowledge of the underlying technology! It was the wildest sort of fantasy to think that I could succeed.

I have not had much experience of despair in my life. I felt it as a leaden weight within my throat, and an aching behind my eyes, and a gripping of my gut that left me unable for a day or more at a time to take sustenance.

Thelaine was dismayed by the darkness of my mood. "Perhaps I can help you with your

work, father," she suggested.

I saw no way that she could. But she so fervently wanted to take part, and I was so reluctant to rebuff her in any way, that I began bringing her into the Tower with me. She stood at my side, she shone

lights for me into the dusty crannies, she handed me tools as I requested them. Her very presence compelled me to moderate the pessimism that continued each night to mount in me. But I could not conceal from myself the reality of the situation, which was that I was making no progress.

The intensity of the comet's light was baleful now and disconcerting even to me. It illuminated the night sky almost like a second sun, though it was a sun that emitted no heat, only a cold terrible glow.

One could see, even with the naked eye, the huge rocky sphere that was its head, jagged and ominous, with thick masses of luminous smoke streaming away behind it. The color of its long tail had changed, now, from its earlier pure white to a kind of frightful yellowish-green, with a hard metallic forcefulness to it that struck the eye the way the clangor of a bell strikes the ear. That change of color troubled me. Could the comet be closer than I had calculated, so close that the stream of gaseous matter that it threw off was reacting with the gases that make up our atmosphere? It was a terrible hour for me. Yet again I doubted my own figures; but I checked and rechecked, and came away convinced once more that I had made no error.

The king called me to him once more. This time I found him in his private quarters in the Citadel, surrounded by the sculptures and paintings and tapestries I had so lovingly made for his father long ago.

"Was it you who summoned the comet to our world, Kell?" he asked sternly.

"You give me too much credit, Majesty. I have many skills, but drawing comets down from the skies is not among them."

"The people speak of it now as 'Kell's tree.' Are you aware of that, Kell?"

I sighed. "I am, yes. The people say many things, Sire, and not all of them are founded in fact. The comet is not a tree, and it is not mine."

"Finish the job of fixing the Alien's ship," he said, "and hurl it against this comet, and let us have an end to this thing. How goes the work?"

"It goes very well, Majesty. I hope to have excellent news for you very soon."

That was an utter lie, not the first I had told this king. It is often necessary for an ordinarily trustworthy man to provide some sort of shaly response to the peremptory demands of unreasonable people.

But on that very night I made the first breakthrough toward success. By baleful comet-light I crossed from the Citadel to the Plaza of

Two priests of the cult of Hayna were beaten in the streets, and one of them died.

the Kings and entered the Tower of the Alien, and ascended the spiraling metal ramp to the control cabin at the top. Theliane was not with me on this particular evening; she had gone to the maze, to the Alien.

I had my hands against the plates and dials of the control panel, which I had inspected without avail so many times before. But this time, because of things the Alien had explained to me about functions and capacities that had suddenly begun to cohere in my mind, I began to see the pattern. I saw only its corner at first, and even that was shrouded in mist; but I am such that even if I see only the corner of a pattern, I often can in time make out the whole of it, and that was what happened now.

I drew new sketches and brought them to the Alien, and he studied them and nodded and drew some sketches of his own, and asked certain questions of me and sent me back to the Tower to find the answers. And I found them, and that led to more questions, and more answers still. And one night a few days later I began to pull broken sections free from the master panel, and to set about the task of designing and forging replacements for them.

So did the real work of repair begin, and so did it proceed. I will not claim that I understood all of what I was doing, or even a great deal of it. The mind that directed the work was the Alien's, from a distance, guiding me from his prison as though he was standing by my shoulder and whispering instructions in my ear; what I contributed were the eyes and the hands, and the metallurgy, and the intuitive skills. It was as though a god had taken hold of me and was bringing forth wonders from me as I lay in his grasp.

Theliane was of no small assistance. Her mind did not have the wide-ranging perception of mine, the ability to make sudden swooping leaps of comprehension and connection, but even so her learning and skills were far from trifling. She had helped me before; she knew why metals behave as they do, how they respond to temperature and pressure, how they are refined and annealed. She had learned more than a little of the purifying arts of melting and reducing and fusing.

She worked with me step by step, phase by phase. She asked sensible and useful questions; she made keen observations. I was proud of her.

I should have burned that Tower to the ground. Instead, with the aid of the Alien's instructions and Theliane's faithful help, and working as ever under the benevolent guidance of my patron god Tutubaratha who is the special deity of artificers, I succeeded in restoring it to working order. It was a triumphant demonstration of my skill. I never knew before that one might live to regret a triumph.

the sky with the Alien on board?

Why, very likely the king would hold me responsible for his departure. I understood the workings of Hai-Thelkon's mind only too well. No matter that I had repaired the ship at the king's own direct order; no matter that I had no apparent motive for aiding the Alien to flee; someone had to be the scapegoat, and I was the one who had done the work. The king would also probably hold me to blame for the coming of the comet, as so many others already were doing. So I would die in some ghastly fashion and the king's anger would be assuaged, and sooner or later the comet would leave the vicinity of our world and Hai-Thelkon would take credit for that, too. But I would still be dead.

So the thought occurred to me that it might be a sensible thing for me to be on board that ship when the Alien took off for his home.

I played with that idea as if it were some wondrous new toy that I had fashioned for myself. To rise into the heavens atop a billowing column of flame; to soar across the darkness, looking down on our world from on high until it dwindled to the size of a grain of sand; to plunge outward into that infinity of stars of which the Alien had so

often spoken — what joy that would be!

And then one day to arrive at the Alien's own world! To behold that prodigiously fantastic landscape with my own eyes!

The mere contemplation of that dazzled me. The blue-green water and the green-leaved trees; the gleaming titanic buildings rising like arrows into the cloud-flecked sky; the hordes of flat-faced people moving through the streets; the vehicles that go forward with no beasts to draw them, the airships that stay aloft without movement of their wings; the mountains that give forth bursts of flame and rivers of molten rock; the flakes of frozen water falling from the skies. I have traveled widely on this world of ours and I have seen many of its famous wonders, the wheel-beasts of the western plains and the phosphorescent lakes of Gemborionta and the voragiar hives of the Velt Peninsula and the trees of salt that grow in Dornin Land, and much else. I have been to the chapel of Kleyssz at Galii and the bottomless pools of Grelf, and I have seen what there is to see at Panga and Rorn and Glay. But all those things would not be a patch on the marvels of the world of the Alien. Endless astonishments would await me there, all the days of my life.

So much to see! So much to learn! The strangenesses, the wonders, the inexplicable enigmas with which I would wrestle. Things that were utterly unfamiliar, that had only shape and color, but no meaning. Things that were fascinating because they were incomprehensible: things whose purposes were unguessable, because they filled needs that were themselves beyond the compass of my mind. What ecstasy to confront such things! What delight to find in every hour of every day the necessity to struggle to understand the simplest things of that other world! I would be like a child again, wandering breathless through a world of mysteries, finding and solving puzzle after puzzle until the larger patterns began to connect themselves and overwhelming revelations came rushing in on my ever-avid mind.

And then I thought of Theliane, and the whole fantasy collapsed into ashes. I could never leave her. She was the joy of my life, the music of my heart. Without her I would be nothing but a strange, lonely, old man with an unusual mind and an empty soul.

*It was
as though a
god had taken
hold of me and
was bringing
forth wonders
from me...*

ON A DAY WHEN I SAW BEYOND ANY DOUBT that success was within my reach, that the completion of the task was at hand, I began to give some thought once again to the predicament I had been creating for myself.

The king had ordered me to repair the Tower for the sake of using it to shatter the encroaching comet; but that, of course, was nonsense. What the ship would be used for was to facilitate the Alien's escape from our world. And what would happen to me, once the Tower went roaring up into

But to bring her with me. How could I do that? To rip her away from all that was familiar to her, and carry her off to a world of unbearable alienness where every moment of every day would confront her with a bewildering jumble of insoluble riddles, and where she would grow old and die without ever having known the touch of a loving mate or heard the laughter of her own children?

No. No. It was impossible. Insane. I banished the idea from my mind.

The ship was ready, though, for testing. I had no idea what to do. And while I hesitated — concealing for the moment the extent of the recent progress I had made, both from the Alien and, of course, the king — catastrophe came down upon me.

It was night. I was in my observatory, measuring the position of the comet. So concerned with my work was I that although I was aware of a curious booming sound, quite loud, and saw out of the corner of my eye an odd flash of red light passing just above the rooftops, it was thirty seconds, at least, before I reacted. By that time I could hear the first sounds of uproar in the city.

"Theliane?" I called. "What's going on out there?"

No answer came. The noises from the street grew louder and more agitated: wild shouts, hysterical outcries of fear. Out of the midst of chaotic yelling came one man's voice, loud and clear as a god's, crying over and over, "The tree is falling into the city! We all are doomed! The tree! The tree! The tree!" The tree, yes. I knew what he meant by that. But the comet was still in its proper place in the sky, a fiercely bright yellowish-green slash across the belly of the darkness. It was not falling on us. It would not fall on us.

I looked for Theliane downstairs, running from room to room, calling her name. She was nowhere in the house. But tacked to the inside of the front door was a note in her handwriting:

Father —

I have gone up into the sky to look at the tree. I must see; I must know. You understand what I am saying.

I love you.'

Gods, no! No!

A reverberating drumbeat of thunder rolled in my head. White fire flashed. I heard a loud buzzing as of ten thousand insects all at once, marching through my brain. For a moment everything grew disjointed, and I was unable to see. The faces of mocking gods whirled about me in a pulsating circle.

Then I collected myself a little and stepped outside the house, and saw throngs running through the streets, hundreds of people, thousands, perhaps, many of them wild-eyed and screaming as they ran, and every one heading in the same direction, eastward, toward the cliffs, the shore, the Living Sea. It was a raging river of panicky humanity; and like a man caught up in some terrible nightmare I allowed myself to be engulfed by that river and borne along by it on its inexorable journey to the sea. Long before I reached the shore I was able to see what it was that was drawing them there. From the high rim of the cliff I saw it, by pale pink sea-glow and yellow comet-light. I would gladly have screened my eyes from the sight. But there was no hiding from it, none.

Theliane's flight in the starship had been very brief. The rust-flecked Tower of the Alien was lying on its side, a short distance out in the Living Sea, jutting up at an angle with perhaps half its length above the surface. Theliane had succeeded in getting the ship aloft, which was miraculous enough, but evidently she had been unable to control it, and it had executed a wobbly, erratic flight lasting no more than a matter of moments, during which it traveled just above rooftop

level across the width of the city from its starting point in the Great Plaza of the Kings, over the temple district and the residential quarter and out past the hill of the royal Citadel, and onward a short distance over the sea.

But there it had reached the end of its journey. The ship's power must have cut off when Theliane was barely beyond the edge of the shore: In my mind's eye I saw the vessel halting in mid-air, standing upright and seemingly motionless above the sea for a moment, and then toppling in a steady downward plunge.

I tell you all this by putting one word after another, in calm, dispassionate, orderly fashion. But I assure you that I was neither calm nor dispassionate nor orderly as I went running down that sloping earthen path from the top of the cliff to the shore of the sea. Nothing was in my mind but the fact that the Tower had gone aloft and that it had crashed and that my daughter was in it, out there in the unknown and threatening substance that is the Living Sea. No, not even that. My only thought was that Theliane was in danger and I must rescue her.

The crowd on the shore melted away to either side of me like mist before the piercing rays of the summer sun as I ran past. Do you know how you seem to move in a dream, as though floating, your feet not touching the ground? That was how I moved then.

I reached the edge of the sea and I did not pause at all. In that dreamlike drifting way I moved out onto the strand of steaming pink mud that forms at the border between land and not-land, and, without breaking my stride, I continued unhesitatingly on out into the body of that great unknown thing that no one had ever entered before.

What did I expect to happen to me? I expected nothing. I hoped only that I would survive the short journey out to the fallen ship, and bring Theliane forth from it alive.

The sea was warm and steaming, and very shallow even when I was fifty or sixty paces out from shore, no more than chest-deep for me. It did not seem to grow deeper at all as I proceeded outward, its strange odor, sweet and not unpleasant, struck my nostrils. I felt its pink substance warm about me, rising past my calves, my knees. It had a thick consistency, oddly agreeable to the touch. A quiet hissing sound came from it, a burbling, a kind of gentle squeak. Each step I took produced a soft sucking effect as I lifted my feet. Small wriggling protrusions rising from the surface of the sea danced playfully about me like little serpents standing on their tails.

Was there pain? No. Were my legs dissolving? No. Was I being transformed into something unimaginably strange? No. I was still myself, still alive, still moving forward. The sea's grasp was like a sly caress, unseen slithering tendrils sliding over my body, across my thighs, my belly, my loins. Sea-stuff was in my mouth, my eyes, my ears. A strand of it had wrapped itself around my throat.

Colors flashed everywhere. There was purple haze all around me. I saw ghosts circling in a shimmering golden aura in the air, faces that seemed almost familiar, one that might have been my father's, and one that resembled King Thak, and one that could have been Theliane's.

I felt no fear. The sea was too warm, too welcoming, too comforting for that.

What I did feel was a strange sense of contact, with the sea, with the sky, with everything that existed in the world. I was immensely extended; I was infinite; I understood what it must be like to be a god.

It seemed to me that I could stretch out my arms and touch the fingertips of one hand to the cliffs behind me and those of the other to

*"The tree
is falling
into the city!
We all are
doomed! The
tree! The tree!
The tree!"*

the coast of the distant unreachable eastern continent halfway around the world, where the three-eyed whistling Other Folk live. It seemed to me also that my head rose high above the clouds, so that I could stare face to face at the gleaming pockmarked visage of the comet, and it could stare at me. And I felt the roots of the planet beneath my feet, the tumbling, charming fires of the core, where the tolling god Manibala sweats eternally over the forge of creation.

I touched a myriad souls at once: the soul of the king, and the soul of the Alien, and the souls of all the people who were clustered along the beach. I made contact with everyone in the world at once. Everyone except one; the only soul I could not find was that of my daughter.

Once I glanced back toward the shore. It was surprisingly far away, a black line against the comet-riven sky. The multitude of townspeople who had gathered there now looked to me like so many insects. They stood motionless, watching, watching, watching, as Kell the lunatic artificer went striding ever farther into the Living Sea.

From the cliff, the starship had seemed only a little way from shore, but the actual distance was greater than I had thought. An endless time went by until at last I came to the ship.

It had fallen into the sea in such a way that the entry hatch was on the underside, beneath the sea's surface. I would have had to submerge myself completely in order to reach it, and that gave me pause for the first time since I had gone out from the shore; but also I realized that Theliane, intending a flight into the cold and darkness of the farther sky, would have dogged the hatch shut before taking off. I would never be able to enter it from without.

Instead I began to clamber up the side of the ship, crawling hand to hand along its ridged skin. There were hand-holds there, perhaps for the use of maintenance personnel on that faraway planet from which it had been launched. Bright droplets of sea-stuff fell away from my hands and arms like glistening pearls as I emerged into the air.

Near the top of the vessel is a porthole made of something like glass, though it is not glass, that provides a view for the occupant of the control cabin. In a desperate plodding way I pulled myself up the ship until I was looking in that porthole, and I looked upon the face of my daughter Theliane.

Her eyes were open, but she was dead.

I had no doubt of that, from the moment I first saw her. Her eyes, those lovely glowing eyes whose color was the delicate color of thyrila eggs, were glassy and unblinking, and filmed over with the unmistakable film of death. Her finely tapered nostril-slits were slack; her mouth drooped and sagged to one side. The posture of her body as she sat in the straps of the pilot's cradle was the posture of the dead.

The shock of the landing impact, no doubt, had killed her. I could not accept that thought, but neither could I deny it. I hammered my hands against the side of the ship until I thought my bones would break. I pressed my face against that porthole and shouted her name again and again, knowing that no sound from outside could possibly penetrate those metal walls. But in any case she could never have heard me.

Then my strength failed me and I dropped away from the ship's skin, falling free of the vessel's flank and landing in the sea. My landing was soft and easy. The sea seemed to reach up to catch me and it drew me down gently into itself. Quietly I lay just beneath the surface, unmoving, not even bothering to breathe, cushioned by the density of the strange warm fluid. I floated. I drifted. I was in the caressing arms of a vast mother.

It embraced me and enfolded me and very soon, I think, it would have begun to digest me. I imagined my skin and my flesh peeling painlessly away, and soon afterward my bones as well. The particles that had composed me would distribute themselves through the body of the sea, and I would be part of it forever.

But that did not happen. Numbly, unthinkingly, I began to paddle with my arms, and after a moment more to drop my feet to the shallow bottom and to push myself forward, and step by step I made my way toward shore.

I came to land close by the Tree of Purple Flame, far down the beach from the place where I had entered the sea. I saw the bright shaft of its smooth white trunk and the ghostly flickering of its unceasing purple radiance, and they drew me onward. The tree was singing, too, a low, gentle, soothing, wordless song of comfort and strength, and as I drew close to it I began to sing also.

Its gnarled roots rose above the surface of the sea. I seized one and clung to it and pulled myself across its smooth slippery sides until I was up out of the sea entirely. I lay there for a time, gasping, looking up into the crown of the tree, seeing the faces there, the eyes, the coiling shapes, the beating wings. Then I rose and walked down the narrow ridge of the root's upper face until I arrived at the trunk itself, and I embraced it, stretching out my arms as wide as they would go. But that was hardly enough to reach one-fiftieth of the way around that great trunk.

People had come down the beach toward me. But they would not go close to the tree; they stood back, gaping, eyes very wide, whispering among themselves.

I saw that the king himself was among them.

"Majesty," I said in a voice that was like a voice from the next world, and let go of the tree trunk and took a few tottering steps toward him. "Majesty, I repaired the ship, and my daughter rode it into the sky without my knowledge or permission. She wanted to see the great comet at close range. And now the ship is in the Living Sea and she is dead within it."

For once there was no bluster about him and no foolishness either. His face was sad and solemn. "She had the same hunger for knowledge that burns in you, Kell."

"Yes. And a great deal more courage."

"She was very brave, yes."

I sank down on the sand before him and tried to make the gesture of obeisance, but I was trembling too much from my exertions to manage it. Hat-Thelkon, bending, caught me by the elbows and lifted me to my feet. His eyes stared into mine.

"What will you do now?" he asked me.

"I will build a machine that will go out into the sea and bring the Tower back to shore," I told him. "And I'll open it up and take her from it, and carry her out of the city to the burial-place and do the things that are done there. And then — then —"

I went faltering into silence. To my great surprise a wrenching sound came from me, from deep down in my throat, a sound that was something like the sound that the Alien had made that time when his face had become moist and he told me that he was expressing his happiness at the thought of going home. It had not seemed like a sound of happiness then. It was not a sound of happiness when it came from me now.

"She was very brave," said the king again. "And very beautiful, I am told."

"Very beautiful, yes, Sir," I said. "She was that. And much more."

THE NEXT DAY I DESIGNED, AND OVER the following week, under my direction, fifty artisans constructed the machine that is to pull the Tower of the Alien from the place where it lies half submerged in the Living Sea. It is a great wooden framework on wheels, a kind of giant wagon, equipped at its front end with a large and sturdy leather hoop that can be tightened by the operation of an arrangement of cogs and wheels.

Pulleys and levers connect the machine to a large and

sturdy iron band that I have caused to be set into the face of the cliff along the shore. Pressure on the levers induces the pulleys to tighten, moving the wagon-wheels and thrusting the machine outward into the sea. Reversing the action of the levers will draw the wagon back toward land. It is a cunning device. The old artificer may have been shattered by grief, but he has not yet lost his skills.

I will ride the wagon tomorrow as it goes into the sea. Despite my demonstration that it is possible to go into the Living Sea and return unharmed, there is still no one else who will venture close to its pink surf. But that is all right. I should be the one who brings Theliane back from the sea, and I will be the one who does it. From my seat atop the wagon, I will operate the controls that bring the hoop into place around the ship and tighten it; and then I will give the signal and the men on shore will pull the wagon and the ship up onto the land.

And what will happen after that?

"Do you think the ship can be repaired again?" I asked the Alien, the day before yesterday. I have gone to visit him every day, since Theliane's death. He is nearly as deeply moved by it as I am.

He said, "I think the ship will turn out not to be very seriously damaged, despite the crash."

"But it fell down into the sea!"

"Not because of any mechanical failure, I think, but simply because she gave it the wrong commands," the Alien said. "She must have become confused. She was speaking a foreign language, after all."

"Speaking?"

"The ship responds to spoken commands. In the language of my planet."

"How would Theliane have known the language of your planet?"

"I taught her," he said quietly. "Years ago. She asked me to. It gave me great pleasure, being able to speak again with someone in my native language. And so she knew how to tell the ship what to do. But once it was aloft she must have become confused. If you give the ship conflicting commands, or say something that makes no sense to it, it might very well tumble out of control."

"Ah," I said. There were signs of anguish plainly visible on his face again; and, I suspect, on mine. Together we had conspired to kill her, he and I, and we had not understood what we were doing at all.

He held out his hands, his odd little stubby-fingered hands, and

clasped my larger ones within them, and we stood like that for a while, face to face, one mourner to another. He made a small sound deep in his throat again; and I made one also. It gives some relief from sorrow, that sound.

Then I said, "In two or three days we will pull the ship out of the sea, and after I have taken Theliane from it and sent her to her eternal rest, it will go back into it and do whatever has to be done to make sure that it is still in working order. And then, Alien, I will come to you here in the maze."

Color came into his long pallid face, and light. "Will you, then?"

"By night, yes, when the gurnies are sleeping or drunk. And if your official guardian Kataphrazes the eunuch happens to be here, I will take him and turn him and turn him and turn him in circles until his hoon-sense is altogether befuddled, and I will lock him up here in your apartment and bring you forth out of this maze that long ago I built for you, and we will go to the ship, you and I, and this time it will receive the proper instructions and it will take you into the sky."

"And you, Kell? Won't the king punish you for that, as you said he would, once I've disappeared? He'll know it was you who was responsible."

"The king will have to find me, first," I said. "And I will be in the sky with you."

"What?"

"Yes," I said. "That is my plan."

WHY NOT?

Why not?

Nothing holds me here now. I will go with him to his world, and let whatever may happen to me there happen. It will be my turn to be the Alien, there. Let them build a maze for me to live in, if that is what they want. Will that be any worse than the way I live here among my own people? I have always been a stranger in their midst. So I will leave, and I will be an alien among the aliens of the Alien's world, and everything will be new and fresh and strange to me, and so be it. So be it.

The comet, I noticed when I took my measurements last night, has passed its point of maximum brightness and soon will begin to fade. Day by day now it will grow ever dimmer, until at last it cannot be seen at all, and then it will be gone from our skies, perhaps for a hundred years, perhaps for a hundred thousand. And I will be gone with it, and gone forever.

So I make my farewell now to this world, and even to its gods, for they will not go with me where I am going. I had faith in them: And what sort of faith did they keep with me, to take from me my only child? Kleyza, goodbye. Goodbye to you, Gamiridon of the bright sword. Maldaz who rules the Sun; Hayna ever-totting Manibul, goodbye. And you also, Tubazaratha, you greatest of artificers. You served me well, even as I was serving you. I will take something of you with me, wherever it is that I go now. But I say farewell even to you.

Perhaps the people, not knowing what has become of me, will tell one another gravely that the comet has carried me off to some place in the stars. I like that. Let them say it. "Kell's Tree," they always called it, in their invincible ignorance. The tree that grew from the sky. "The tree reached down to us to get him," they will say. "And he has climbed it and vanished into the sky." But no. No. Whatever they say, it was never a tree. A comet is what it is, and nothing else. My comet, Kell's Comet. And now its brightness fades. It begins to take its leave of them. And so does the Artificer Kell. □



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THE BEAUTY MONSTER

THE PEOPLE OF THE PASPERETTI, ON THEIR distant and glorious world, suffered beneath the yoke of universally shared visions that culminated in one divine ultimatum: to ward off the ill-anticipated Decade of Spiritual Desuetude and Despair, predicted by all sages, one from among them needed to undergo a journey faraway, to find the creatures with two hands and five fingers upon each hand, with one head apiece with dual ocular organs and twin air intakes and single mouth and two auditory organs the flaps of which protruded to each side. There, among these bizarre denizens of a blue world, they would find the redeeming vision of Beauty. The mere sight of this Universal would allay both the Spiritual Desuetude and the Despair. Go, and pay tribute, said the withered oracle within their common dream: And if you can do this, and bring back news, you will be saved!

The secret sign of Universal Beauty, whereby It might be recognized, appeared to the Pasperetti. In light of this intelligence they sent the Emissary, via celestial car, to where the oracle declared It resided.

On Earth about this time, Arlene Spauhoffer, fifteen-and-a-half-years old, presented her hands to her mother. She regarded her hands as among the most perfect possible. She grew her fingernails

*The aliens
were in search
of perfect beauty,
but they had to
settle for Arlene.*

BY MARK RICH

Illustration by Gary Yealdhall

long, though not too long, and kept them manicured, but not to too great a degree of ostentation. Her skin had the amber translucence of a fogged but fine glass, without blemish. The lengths of each finger fit into perfect proportion, without any one being too small or too large when compared with any other. Her palm stretched slightly from wrist to the base of her fingers, and suggested none of the blackness of laborer hands. When she went to the movies she put them carefully together on her lap, eschewing candies, colas, and popcorn. She felt the beauty of them in the darkness, folded together like petals on a flower destined to open.

She felt that way about her life: destined to open. Her classic profile she inherited from Dad, who in college played football and now spent his hours with Waddell and Spaulhofer Inc., lighting and security specialists, at the offices of which he also operated a sideline business as a broker of toy sales for a model-train distributor. He played golf, had lunch at Sam's Hong Kong Palace, took a few drinks at the club, ate a sandwich there or at the Burgerama if he had an evening meeting for W&S or if he planned to continue into the evening in the tiny office from which he made his toy-store calls. He saw Mom, whose soft brown eyes and low cheekbones and quieter lines put the finish on Dad's Roman features in the collaboration which was Arlene, well after Arlene's bedtime — according to Mom. He also, Arlene felt convinced, had given her the slightly wide shoulders which would serve her well in her modeling. She had one lingerie photo appear already in *Spank* ads in Cleveland-area advertising supplements, although in it she appeared half-profile, making her shoulders look undistinguished.

From Mom she inherited a set of lips which, her father once commented one weekend when he stayed home a few hours into the morning, gave her a perpetual pout. She practiced the expression for a while, jutting the lower ever so slightly. Then she practiced another look, relaxing both lips and holding them slightly open, while her eyes went distant. She could do this and hold a profile toward the windows in Room 101 at school and drive Tony Robbins to distraction, even though Tony pretended to be a brain. He did well on his tests.

Someday she would be on magazine covers, and on television. The world would stop and look.

"What are these? They're like little bumps," Arlene said to Mom, holding out her right hand.

Mom bent away from the *News Chic* and lifted her daughter's hand from the table to look closely.

"It's nothing," Mom said, laughing lightly. "Those are just little warts."

"Warts? They're just little bumps?"

"That's what warts are."

"I can't have warts!"

"Nothing wrong with warts. People get them."

Arlene knew what sort got warts. "So what do I do, Mom? What do I do?"

"There's stuff in the medicine cabinet."

"Does it work quick?"

"What's your hurry?"

"Mom, I asked a question!"

"Sure it's quick, or probably it is. Maybe a few weeks."

"Mom!"

"How am I to know? I never had them."

"Mom!"

"Maybe I did. I don't remember." Mom buried herself again in the

*Some of
the women
looked so
beautiful he
nearly
asphyxiated
himself trying
to breathe
normally.*

mishaps, lies, and intrigues of the royal family of some island kingdom.

"What's it called?" Arlene said, walking out.

"I don't know. Lady Di's Hand and Toe Crease. How am I to know?"

"You bought it."

"Dad did."

Arlene doubted Dad bought anything, not being more than a ghost figure when it came to household realities.

"Mom," she said, pawing through the cabinet, "do you think I should change my name to Darlene? Isn't that catchier? Models change their names all the time."

"Whatever you say, Diana."

Although the cream worked less than instantly — she watched closely for the first few minutes, and after that trusted to the passage of hours and then days — by the time she raised her hand to answer a question about the Hunter Moon, and the rendering of some hapless idiot who looked upon a naked goddess, an answer which, she took pleasure in noting, Tony Robbins appeared not to know, she held up a hand virtually free of blemish. She might have held up any part of her and been able to say the same.

In the space of time between classes that always went too quickly, Tony Robbins actually spoke to her.

"You going to the play tonight?" he said, as if asking about the weather. For a brainy guy he pulled it off pretty smoothly, she thought. It made her tighten her eyes and glance at him.

"What play?"

"You know, the school play. *The Rape of Helen*."

"It's not called that!"

"Then you do know about it. You going?" It came out less casually this time.

"Why should I go?"

"I don't know. To see it. You go to plays to watch them. That's all. It's fun."

"So why're you asking?" She turned her head a little sideways, to look at him more directly.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe if you were going, we'd talk about it afterward. If you want to talk to someone would you rather talk about class stuff, or about something else? I mean, really."

The boy sounded sensible as all get-out. "Fish," she said.

"Then you're going?"

She frowned and tossed her head. "I've got an appointment for that modeling job. You saw the ads? For that wart-cream company?"

"You have warts?"

"Of course not, dummy. Why would I be a model if I had warts? They want perfect hands. That's what any of those companies want if they're going to pay to put hands in ads. They want perfect and beautiful hands and Mom says I can apply because I'm earning money for college."

"Wow."

"So I guess I can't go. To the play, I mean."

"Oh."

She smiled as a way of saying how sorry she felt, and wondered why she lied about that night. She had the appointment, sure. She would have her interview at four, an hour after school got out. After that, in the evening, she had her date with Ed Pankowitz. She finally gave in today, and promised she would go to the ice cream shop with him, in his new car.

When Tony Robbins turned away down the hall she noticed he clutched something in his hands. Looked like some pieces of card-

board, probably getting sweaty there: tickets. It made her feel anxious for some reason, and a little displaced. She liked the feeling without having the faintest clue why.

To herself in her locker mirror she said, with the kind of snugginess that will wipe away any memory, "I'm going to have my hands interviewed!"

IN A SMALL SHOP RENTED FOR THE PURPOSE, for one day, Mr. Eglantine Bobbs tidied the all-black front of his jacket, and straightened the flowers in the vase. His newly hired assistant for the day, Jeremy, swept the carpet and made sure the large magnifying glass sat in place to focus about a foot above the desk. A strong light sat next to it. The place looked like a vision-exam room. Except Jeremy knew Mr. Bobbs had no eyes for eyes.

Mr. Bobbs had flashed a business card to him, at the employment office: "Lady Di's Wart Ward-Off and Toe and Finger Creams, All Strengths! Mr. Eglantine Bobbs, Advertising Specialist." He would be looking for hands today. Hands for ads. Mr. Bobbs might come back another day to inspect feet. Who knew? Some days they needed feet. Jeremy had been standing around looking at the employment cards when Mr. Bobbs approached and offered fifty bucks for his help today. "Fifty bucks, sure, no problem," Jeremy said with his quickest smile. Easiest fifty he ever earned. It mostly meant getting women to take numbers from a roll of tickets and go in the door in the right order. Nothing weird about it either. The way the office was set up, people in line could see the person whose hand was being examined currently by Mr. Bobbs. Hundred percent clean. Jeremy liked this job a heck of a lot. Wished he could do it every day. Might ask Mr. Bobbs about it. "So, what if I came along? You go from city to city, right? It's just hands and feet stuff, right?" Jeremy himself looked at their faces and their clothes and the way their clothes corresponded to form, and the legs. He liked legs. Girls and women came to this thinking it hurt them not at all to appear a little declassified, with their information somewhat in view. Some came in who had a little age on them and looked good in a more mature way. A good many showed up who seemed his age, which was just odd enough. It gave him a healthy internal glow to be here, giving out numbers, reassuring women they would not be waiting too long, and giving instructions: "All you have to do is put your hand on the desk where he can see it through his glass, and then your other one, though I guess he's really after a good right hand. So it's really the right hand he wants to see — but heck, if you think your left hand has the goods, why not show him that first? Maybe you'll sell him on that — who knows?" Some of the women looked so beautiful he nearly asphyxiated himself trying to breathe normally. He wanted to stare at faces and let the visual overflow soak in. He did his job, however. He knew enough to earn his fifty bucks, since Mr. Bobbs had promised a bonus if all ran smoothly. He ran the smoothest ship possible upon these undulating waters.

"Don't be surprised if you have trouble understanding Mr. Bobbs," he told the girl who wrote, neatly, her name and phone beside Number 402: Ariene Spannhoffer. After her name she added, "(Professional Model)."

"He can't speak well?" she said.

"He speaks funny. Foreign, I guess."

"I like foreigners."

"Hey, we're all foreigners someplace, aren't we?" Jeremy kept surprising himself with these sharp lines, bam-bam-bam, one after the

Jeremy failed to notice Mr. Eglantine Bobbs throwing away his fake clothes, head and arms into the garbage dumpster...

other. He glowed and let some of it show in his smile.

"But how do we know who he chooses? Or is he going to choose more than one of us?"

He shrugged. "He might choose more. He's not really saying, but maybe he's hiring other models, too. I mean not just for hands. That's an important company he's working for."

"I'll say." She almost said it like she believed it.

She went in for her appointment. Jeremy reeled off his snazzy lines for the next one. I'm in love with a million girls, he thought.

When the last of the women had her appointment and left, with a last confirmation of phone number and hours available, Jeremy hummed into the interview room, exhausted but with the quiet ecstasy of afterglow.

"That does it!" he said. "That's everyone!" He expected to see Mr. Bobbs relaxing back in his chair, hand to his chin, his eyes on the ceiling as he considered all the applicants today.

Instead the tall man, an odd man who wore all black from top to bottom, and whose face had an oddly squashed and squelched appearance, as though he had stood too long on his head as an infant, sat shaking his head and muttering to himself.

"How could I have missed? How could I have missed for she was surely here, she was most certainly!"

"You didn't choose one? But they were all so —"

"Did you not find the Beauty? Not the Beauty! Did you not see the sign?" He held out a trembling

hand, with long, yellowish fingers. "Only one particular Beauty, in only this town! We know! By vision! And since I don't find her, now the Decade of Spiritual Desuetude and Despair descends over us! Ten years for all our world!"

He practically fell into tears and grew utterly unintelligible, not that Jeremy pretended to understand what he did make out of the man's talk.

"Oh, so does that mean — I mean, even if you didn't find the hand you were looking for, the whole thing still went — ah, smoothly, didn't it?"

So startled was Jeremy to have a hundred dollars shoved into his fingers that he failed to notice Mr. Eglantine Bobbs leaving through the back door, throwing away his fake clothes, head and arms into the garbage dumpster there and then, and as a hump of vibrating flesh, climbing into a black Cadillac that revved quietly and floated up above town before blinking out of existence in order to flash across four hundred light-years to the planet of the Pasperetti, where his own kind writhed in a penance of anticipation, and where he reported, with tears still springing from the tips of his ocular cilia: "The Beauty was gone. I was too late! The vision said she would have the three lumps on her hand exactly like the three moons of our sky. But I did not see the sign! I did not see!"

The Pasperetti as one wept in sorrow as the Decade of Spiritual Desuetude and Despair fell like a grey curtain across the world, condemning them to ten years of inaction and apathy.

On Earth about this time Ed Pankowitz's head flipped back from the slip he received after a fumble in the intimacy zone, which he attempted after feeling encouraged by the interest this chick Ariene showed when he mentioned his model Soo Line train set. Why would any girl show interest in that unless she was interested in something else? Ariene arrived home miffed and moody, for she broke a fingernail in slapping the jerk. She planned to pout at least an hour. It was an utter disaster, after all. □

When Kalthorn rented his central nervous system to the Company, he thought that his worries were over. He obviously hadn't counted on Dolores.

SEVEN POSTCARDS

I.

THE SURFACE OF THE PARKING LOT BELOW MY WINDOW
IS AS BLACK AND SMOOTH AS SPACE-HARDENED SKIN

I PUSH MY NOSE against the window of my dorm room and look out at the impastoed yellow lines of the parking spaces. My spatial perception has gone, the shapes have no meaning, and the yellow-and-black flickering makes me dizzy.

Someone is gaining illegal access to a security gate, using the pattern-recognition processing of my visual association cortex. Not far from here

FROM THE HIGHWAY AND NOT A JACKALOPE AMONG THEM

BY ALEXANDER JABLOKOV
Illustration by Jack Harris



either. Just at the end of the campus spine road ... they are through, and the processing is mine once more. I can once again understand the crisp structure of the parking lot.

At this hour of the morning the only users of the lot are two student-modified energy robbers tumorous with nacelle-enclosed turbine generators that, at highway speeds, reaggregate the ions in the banks of fuel cells stuffed into the rear seats, converting the subsidized public-line voltage of the interstate matelways into family Joules via a satisfyingly primitive TIG-welded mechanical intermediary.

A nostalgia-image company must be imprinting, because an ancient hard-touring Winnebago with armored tire skirts has wandered into the secure parking lot. This banyan-covered dorm with its twitching splintered windows is a poor choice for a backdrop for a movie of the sleepy 20th century. Perhaps it will stand in for a Mayan ruin or a nuclear waste disposal site.

But the students in the other rooms dangle their noctilucent underwear off the fused bamboo beams as a sign of hospitality and the

workers obsessed with their mothers, I learn about everyone, who they are, what they're after. I'm a valuable Company asset.

My belly suddenly feels full of lead. My myenteric plexus, usually in charge of peristalsis in my intestines, is now controlling the snaking of a digging device. I massage my belly, wait it out. The access is close, somewhere out in the parking lot. The worm digger finds its goal, an electric cable, and my guts rumble.

The parking lot lights have gone out. It makes the night view nicer, I notice. The hills above the college are dark. A crumbly, failed-mining-project-covered Moon is creeping slowly above them.

I pour myself a cup of coffee. No taste, no smell, though my lips sense the heat. The olfactory cortex in my temporal lobe and the gustatory nucleus in my medulla have been co-opted for — I concentrate on the feeling of licking something delicious and foul — slowly sensing the way through a complex EM security field.

My hand shakes uncontrollably and I spill coffee across the table. My caudate nucleus. It's linked into an aided-climb apparatus. Someone's taking a quick jog up a vertical surface. A real break-in!

High-value info, in other words. The climb is on the other side of my wall, up the outside of the dorm.

My sight disappears, mapped into the 15-degree wide, 360-degree arc of a perimeter surveillance camera. My peripheral vision's just acting as a motion detector, though I can sort of integrate up an image of a flowering hedge, a dark parking lot, a squat banyan-covered building ... but my foveal processing is double-spot-flying up the wall of the leafy structure, sailing in over the shoulder of the dark figure leaning against the lit oval window, to peer at a twitching fat man slumped on a couch, his mouth open, an overturned coffee cup on the table next to him dripping liquid to the floor ...

The knock on the glass brings me back. All my processing returns, and for the first time I feel real fear. I've been tracking the damn break-in since that duplicitous Winnebago pulled through the security gate of the campus, but haven't had a single emotional reaction to the approaching threat. My limbic fear response has been locked down in a processing loop, billed as interdepartmental E-mail. I get it back with a vengeance, and start to shale.

A dark silhouette stands at my window. It scribes fracture lines in the glass, and an oblong slab falls onto the rug with a dull thump. Now I can hear the yawling menagerie-slap of party music bouncing across the empty parking lot, full of the screams of tortured animals, popular this year. The performers are gene-modified house pets with megaback incomes, habituated to a sweetly profitable masochism.

"Dolores." She's wearing a black rayon break-in outfit with kevlar knee and elbow patches. I'd forgotten how great she looks.

"Come on, Kalhorn, let's go."

I fall from the couch, scabble for the dorm refrigerator, buried under a pile of old clothes.

"I have it, Dolores," I babble. "I swear. A quart, maybe a half-gallon ..."

"Never mind the milk, Kalhorn, let's get out of here."

"No ... no ... you have a right ... I didn't mean ..." I pull open the refrigerator — and freeze in horror. There's no milk in there, and the compressor has burned out from the thick dust covering the floor. My food is delivered from the pushcart that goes up and down the hall. All I have in the refrigerator is my ampoules of Nergvgr™, useful for regrowing neural tissue scorched by overamped feedback. "Oh my God ..."

"Kalhorn!" She grabs my arm and feels the sagging skin, the squishy-soft, rotting-tropical-fruit storage abscesses that lie in my swollen adipose layers. They are full of gene-altered neurotransmit-

I lease out inactive parts of my central nervous system ... When my left visual field disappears, I know my visual cortex is moonlighting as a surveillance camera at a lingerie store ...

pheromone-dripping, cactus-spoke crotch lace attracts clouds of furiously struggling moths. Nothing like the green dumpsters and glass-fronted strip malls needed to contextually set off a Winnebago.

I don't know how the RV got in here in the first place. There are security gates blocking access.

But I have work to do. I can't worry about misdirected film crews. I force myself away from the window and slide down on my couch. Like other students at the school, I lease out inactive parts of my central nervous system during downtimes to earn spending money. But I'm a ringer, registered but not attending, and the college tattoo on my cheeks is an inkjet-sprayed fake. My implanted connections give me conscious access to the request files, and thus I make money for the Company.

When your average student gets a surge of atetosis, say a sudden twist of the forearm, and dumps the beer he was about to drink into his lap, he can merely chuckle, contemplating the automatic addition to his bank balance, and order another. I, on the other hand, know that my globus pallidus has just been linked into the control system of a backhoe on the outskirts of Fargo. When my left visual field disappears, I know my visual cortex is moonlighting as a surveillance camera at a lingerie store in a shopping mall in Muskogee, and when I can't think of the term "Oedipus complex" I know the speech processing of my Wernicke's Area is serving a pay psychotherapy booth in the Marietta bus station.

Not only do I learn about well-traveled, cross-dressing construction

tersecreting fungal colonies. She winces as her fingers sink in. "We don't have much time."

"They'll take my job someday..." The refrigerator is full of dead cockroaches. They climbed in and sucked up the Nervogro™. Their nervous systems swelled up through their chitinous shells, making them look like they're wearing necklaces of dried apples. Unfortunately for them, the arthropod nervous system completely surrounds the digestive tube. Their brains grew, the tube swelled shut, and they starved to death — a preadaptive evolutionary accident that is now the only guarantee of vertebrate neural superiority. In their last moments they covered the inside of the refrigerator with desperate philosophical treatises scrawled in their own bodily fluids, using languages and scripts of their own invention.

"Kalhorn!" She slams the refrigerator shut.

"I know what you want to make me do. You have a tent out there, a pack. My old sleeping bag."

"And what if I do? You're out of shape, Kalhorn, you're a mess. A hike will do you good."

"That's what broke us up in the first place, I tell myself. I never enjoyed camping out...."

"No!" I grab on to the legs of my couch for security. She won't be able to pull me loose.

She checks a wrist display, shakes her head. "All right, Kalhorn, if you say so." She backs toward the window. "Just remember that when they check the log, it'll look like I got in here with your cooperation." And just like that, she's gone.

"Damn it!" I crawl to the window, look out. It's a dizzy drop to the ground, and Dolores is already halfway down, her climbing support telescoping down to its base, releasing its grab points on the living frame of the dorm. I grab the edges of the glass and pull myself out through the opening, squeezing the sides of my belly past the ultrasound-powdered edges.

She hears me and looks up. "No, Kalhorn, don't —"

I step out onto the banyan runners. They're sturdy, enough to hold even my weight, but slippery. I grab desperately at the plants around me, but these are just decorative and not structural. The vine tendrils pull loose of their supports, closed-up flowers shred in my hands, the banyan slides out from under my feet, and the parking lot, so distant, comes up to make my acquaintance.

II.

UP CLOSE THE PAVEMENT IS ROUGH
LIKE THE UNDERSIDE OF SOMETHING
NOT MEANT TO BE TURNED OVER

"Kalhorn!" In response to her voice I return, every bit of me, collected piece by piece like trash along a highway by a gang of work-release prisoners.

A soft red in her hand shines dimly on Dolores's concerned face. Her other hand is on my forehead in an ancient, functionless gesture. The soft red tells her what she needs to know about my health. She moves her hand off my forehead and prods the side of my head, frowning. I understand her puzzlement. I smacked my skull in the pavement after a fall of some thirty feet, but she's getting back nine nines of function on her head.

"Impact-resistant casing," I say, my speech centers far from a sojourn at a public address system in Presque Isle. "Required by contract." My head is something like 50 percent larger than it was when last she saw it. But then, the armor laminates in my skull now make it resistant to anything short of direct hit by a discarding-sabot, depleted-uranium, armor-piercing projectile. So what if I look like I'm wearing a football helmet under my hairpiece, my face a bowling-ball-grip concentration of features in one small area? Mixed sports metaphors are the least of my problems.

She looks at me. "You're all right now, Kalhorn," she says, and sighs.

"What's wrong?"

"They're on me now. It was close, before. I could just have made it...."

And that's the way she's always sucked me in.

"Who?"

"You know who. Come on. We can't worry about it now." She looks around.

"Damn! They're fast."

Tire-busting spikes have risen up through the access road, and gleam in the moonlight like some sprouting accelerated-growth crop. Good, I suppose. I didn't really want to leave. Not with her. The traffic signal now glows constant green, a sardonic come-on.

"Do you remember how to break into a car? Here. We have a couple of minutes, I think, and I need all the juice I can get."

I reluctantly accept the two lamprey-mouthed cables she is holding out to me.

A wind has kicked up out of the hills, shifting dust past us, and I can hear the generator turbines whirring gently on the energy rubber cars.

The car bodies are aluminorganic laminates, doors sealed with molecule-migration locks. But I don't actually need to get into the car. All I need is a path for a high-voltage stream of electrons. The lamprey-mouth grabs onto the outer lamina and starts to pull itself through the alternating layers of aluminum and resin-impregnated composite, grunting to itself like a child with a cookie.

"Please," a voice whispers, "please, Mister. That's my car. I need... you must need it more than me, but please, I need..."

It's a coed, wandered away from the eternal party that bounces off the walls of the corridors in the dorm. Long, blond hair, dark eyes, she wears her boyfriend's letter jacket over a short, almost nonexistent skirt, and her legs are long... she reaches out to me.

"My mother," she says. "I need it to visit my mother."

"Is she sick?" I say.

"Please, Mister." The jacket isn't buttoned, it's a warm night, and it falls open, pale gray silk underneath, bunched up a little above her hips. "She needs the power. The charge." Her mouth is slightly parted, her lips seemed to shine with their own light.

The tactile indicator on the lamprey-mouth pulses, informing me of the power being sucked out of the fuel cells. How much of it did Dolores really need? What difference did it make, after all? We were trapped here in this parking lot. This poor girl's mother....

"I don't like the guys in the dorm," she says. "They're just too rough. I've always wondered what you did there in that room all alone."

I clear my throat. "Oh, nothing much."

"Kalhorn." It's Dolores. "Who the hell are you talking to? Oh my God."

I'd leased out the anterior and preoptic areas of my hypothalamus to a sperm bank in Coeur d'Alene, but now I have them back, and feel the lust those little sex-drive nuclei bring on. I know just how that silk will feel as it slides on her skin. I reach out....

"Damn it, Kalhorn, have you forgotten everything?" A flare of light ceases my vision, sparks cascade. My night vision is ripped apart by a glow of blue blindness and I shake my head, trying to make it go away. Dolores taps the high-voltage leads together one more time, crack-pop, then reconnects them to her power system. Sparks skitter along the asphalt and disappear.

The girl, the student. Has Dolores...? No scream, maybe she just crisped up and blew away like campfire ashes. Dolores has always had a short way with other women. It's one of the things I like about her.

I have to use my peripheral vision to look at what's left. It's a modified maintenance/cleaning robot, the kind that rules the night in the college's gardens and hallways. The supports of the shoulder-high vacuuming extension could be the epaulettes of a letter jacket. Above the nozzle, with its ring of bright red anti-scratch plastic, are the delicate feathers of what might be eyelashes. The induction motor is a triangle of black below. The texture — smooth silk with warm flesh underneath — came from a parasitic signal that took over the tactile read on the lamprey-mouth. I stroke it — just one more time — but now it's back to the vibrotactile that tells me the car's fuel cells are down to the level of the two D batteries in a forgotten flashlight at the back of a closet. I push-click, feel it jab a needle into my finger to check my DNA for authorization, and it lets go of the car with a satisfied sigh.

"You know, you've gotten a little too symbol-oriented," Dolores says.

"Symbols are all I had up there," I say. "My job." That young student would have been soft and fragrant, just the thing for an old bundle of cognitive processes like me. Too bad she was just a computer-controlled vacuum cleaner. I should send the thing up to my room, now that I was out of it. It could sure use a bit of a cleaning. I could rest back on my couch, coil the corrugated hose around me . . .

"Get in the car, Kalhorn, and let's get out of here."

"How?" I get into the uncomfortable front seat of the Winnebago anyway, but there's nowhere to go. The spikes in the street are just as sharp and unforgiving as they were before.

"Just watch." She backs, curves around the parking lot, then bumps up over the curb onto the painstakingly maintained grass. Ahead of us is the gleam of a reed-filled swamp. Biota alerts must be going out to Buildings and Grounds. They take their lawns seriously.

The Winnebago's powerful motor whines, and we do doughnuts on the lawn. Dolores slams the wheel over first one way, then the other, like a pro. The area where we just were puffs shredded plant fragments as B&G's canister-launched flechettes search for our tender flesh. The tiny spikes are made of nitrate fertilizer. Next year the lawn will be greener than ever. Our B&G guys don't miss a trick. Last year they made a name for themselves reforesting Crete, quite against the will of the inhabitants, who are being compelled to study remedial brachiation from a derisive bunch of cortex-amped gibbons. Next year they plan to turn central Australia into a complex of boiling water-filled fumaroles, providing a badly needed home for sulfur-using bacteria.

"Did you see a sign?" Dolores demands.

"A sign?"

The Winnebago's front wheels hit the smooth water of the pond. Instead of sinking, we slide across what is revealed to be a micropolished steel plate. What I have always thought were the forms of patient frogs are really massive hex nuts keeping the thing bolted onto its invisible substructure.

"Like KEEP OFF THE GRASS. Ha!" Dolores redlines the screaming motor. The left rear wheel suddenly gets purchase on the grass on the other side of the metallic mirage. We lurch wildly, almost overturning, then the other wheel grabs on. We bump down over the curb.

III. THE ROAD CIRCLES PAST THE CAMPUS. ITS INTESTINE CURVES CONVEYING PERISTALTIC BOLUSES OF TRAFFIC

"The world is a sign," I say. "Everything you've seen since being born was telling you to stay off that grass." My restraining harness flops loose. I turn around and get up on my knees, to look out of the back window at my rapidly disappearing campus. The back of the camper is crammed solid with equipment, leaving only a narrow passage to the bathroom in the rear. Dolores has always been a packrat.

"Could you take the wheel? I need to do something."

I turn, look, and grab desperately for it, because she's already let go. I have no control over the speed, Dolores has locked down some sort of manic governor, and the traffic is getting heavier as we descend the hill toward the glowing lights of town.

"Shoulda taken this before. It's a long shot, but —"

Dolores sits down at the kitchen table, punches something on a screen. Behind us, just as it disappears, I see the surface of the pond split and open up.

"Quite a little historical sight," she says.

"I always thought it was a pond." I feel sad that it isn't.

"It's an old Minuteman III silo," Dolores punches more frantically at the panel in her hand as I swerve around a kris-fendered Malaysian sports car, the driver gazing blankly at this apparition from the past. "They cored it right out of the North Dakota topsoil and shoved it down in here, an exhibit for the college's Department of Mass Annihilation, along with the Zykron B canisters. Official story is that the missile is nonfunctional . . ."

"Official story? Yow, Jesus!" I am forced to plough right through a red light. Pushing the brakes makes the van buck and scream, but has no discernable effect on our velocity. The engine is racing too fast, and I think I can feel turbosfans kicking in just above the rear wheels. I leave a phalanx of furiously honking cars behind me. I'm still hanging desperately out of my seat, steering with a crick in my neck. The ridged steering wheel is slick under my sweat-drenched fingers. Any moment now I'll lose my grip and it will spin away on its own course. Whatever happened to the push-button steering we were once promised?

"Oh, for heaven's . . ." She slaps at a lever and the engine dies. I take a sharp right off the main drag, balancing us precariously on two wheels. We fall back down with a whump and drift to a halt in a quiet residential neighborhood. Howling police cars tear past the end of the street. "I think we're far enough away now. Yeah, official. Your college isn't qualified for antisatellite gear, you know that? Kinda lowers your Peterson's rating, even getting the cheerleaders to bare their breasts at the Homecoming game doesn't really make up for it . . ."

A dome of light rises up above the hill that now conceals the campus from view, then narrows down to a single bright flare: The missile has been launched.

Dolores breathes through her teeth, watching tensely. One of her eyes is covered with the black disk of a Head-Up Display, pumping direct trajectory data onto her retina. I hear the shriek of shoulder-launched, crowd-control sound disrupters, painful even at this distance — Campus Security is making a Mace-and-cattle-prod-assisted sweep of the dorms, seeking the fraternity-initiation-addled culprits who are the immediate suspects for the launch.

"Come on, baby." The flaming rocket pauses, seems to hang in space . . . then a single searing streak shoots up from it, as the rest detonates, inaudible in the high atmosphere. Flaming chunks come showering down, tracked by the computerized home telescopes of Age of Space souvenir seekers, who soon will be squabbling over the smoking shards of metal embedded in someone's lawn. Not too many of them old launch vehicles left, after all. "Go for it! Seven, six . . ." she counts down under her breath.

"Three, two . . ." It's an old anti-satellite missile, of course, probably experimental, configured to piggyback on the obsolete Minuteman hardware. "One, now . . . Yes! Go, go, go!" She takes a deep, excited breath, though the sky shows no sign of whatever just happened. "Let's switch places, Kalhorn, I got stuff to do."

The sky is blank and featureless, bleached out by the lights of the city and the glow of the Moon. I feel a mysterious sense of loss. Dolores's ASAT hit the geosynchronous satellite that usually hangs low down in the sky to the south, a part of the Company's communications linkages. It also provided surveillance for this part of the globe. For now, at least, we are invisible to it, and I am alone with my dear Dolores.

IV. THE ARTERIAL IS JAMMED WITH CARS — DASHBOARD DISPLAYS SPILL SHORT-TERM EXPIRATION COUPONS NO ONE WILL MAKE IT TO THE STORE SOON ENOUGH TO USE

A glowing route map spreads thickly through our windshield. We've moved about fifteen feet in the past twenty minutes. I see that shaped charges placed by glibble humans duped by frenetically persuasive hyperlingual chimpanzees and bonobos demanding their own cable channel have blocked Cahuenga pass. Further delays expected . . .

"Tell me, Kalhorn," Dolores says. "Who do you work for?" She sits with her feet propped up on the dashboard, exactly as if every worldwide corporate asset is not now dedicated to her destruction.

"The Company, Dolores. The Company. Can't say the name, you know that, it's just an access code, a multidimensional logo, a series of conjugations in cognitive space. Try to pronounce it, I'd fear my tongue, I'd need cosmetic surgery . . ."

"What's its NYSE symbol?"

"Not publicly traded. Not that way, in discrete chunks, in tedious shares. It's more *holographic*, existing everywhere simultaneously, hitching rides on the undersides of other transactions, things like bulk purchases of rat kibble for home neorommed experiments, interbank fund transfers, Federal Witness Protection cards getting traded in school yards — you know, by the time you discover you're popular with the undesecured-testicle set it's too damn late, there's nothing you can do —"

"Oh, bullshit. You're just trying to weasel out of a commitment."

Teenagers thunder overhead on powered roller skates, leaping from car roof to stranded car roof. Any one of them could be etching an identifying bar code on the Winnebago's roof, as if the damn thing is hard to spot in the first place. Traffic stutters forward a couple of feet, then stops again.

"Dolores —"

"You dumped me, Kalhorn. Remember? You told me you were going to the corner for a quart of milk —"

"You said we were out —"

"— And you never came back!"

"I had to go," I say. "It was the only way."

"So what was I supposed to put on my cereal the next morning? Orange juice?"

"I'll get you some milk. I said I would."

"I don't need any milk!"

This is getting too heavy. To distract myself, I rake my thumb across the pill dispensers above the climate controls. Growth hormone, ibogaine, Flinstone multiple vitamins ... there they are. I knew they had to be. The traffic jam is making me edgy. I balance three Fugits on my tongue, feeling the sear of their jalapeño-mint coating, then dry swallow.

"Don't worry," I say. "We'll be out of this in no time."

"Kalhorn," Dolores says. "Why are you talking so slowly?"

Her voice jabbars past me. The Fugit is taking hold, slowing my body's reactions.

"Relax. I'll tell you more when we finally get out of this." My explanation probably takes five minutes, and she's lost interest before I'm even halfway through.

Most of the other drivers are Fugit too. Nothing like it for a traffic jam. As the drug hits, things start to pick up. Cars jerk forward like spastic chickens. Traffic signals strobe, their information no longer meaningful. We drift down the street, faster and faster, until it is no longer boring, until, in fact, it is sweetly terrifying. I skin my lips back from my teeth, and my teeth are dry instantly.

I invented a game to play on Fugit. But you'd need a big dose. Massive. The game is called Pangea Pool, and it takes advantage of continental drift. Once, millions of years ago, the continents were all unified in one big lump, Pangea. That split up, and they drifted around, smashing into each other, raising mountains, sinking rifts. But there was no scoring, no way of telling who was ahead. Just random stuff. But if you move slowly enough, you can push the continents around, make it a competitive thing, score it by mountain uplift height, by angle of impact. I've figured out all the rules, but it's been hard starting a league. Innovators always suffer. Around me, the cars are moving so fast they flicker like some kind of quantum effect, and the Moon rises overhead like a thrown basketball, but the motion of the continents is not yet perceptible.

Suddenly I'm slammed back into real time. Dolores has jabbed a chelating blocker into my carotid.

"Get ready," she says.

"Jesus, Dolores, you're such a killjoy — hey!" My words are blot-
ted out by the thunder of helicopter blades overhead. The windows
flare as searchlights stab down at us.

Giant scoop blades close in, shatter the windows, and dig into the underside of the roof. A negligent heave from the heavy-lift 'copter and we float free of the street, swinging back and forth above the receding car roofs. Several drivers, jealous of what they perceive as a piece of unsportsmanlike jam jumping, fire pull-claws up at the helicopter's underbelly. One, a tiny Eritrean three-wheeled sandbug, succeeds in catching on and it, too, floats free of the traffic, flashing gleefully obscene signs from its rear-window LED display at its erstwhile compatriots, who blow their horns in dissonant rage.

We feel the massive 'copter yaw ponderously, trying to eliminate the stowaway. A cool breeze blows through our shattered windows. The city is turning into a glowing gridwork below us as we spin slowly above it. The searchlights have gone off, and it is dark around us.

"Just what I need," Dolores says in exasperation as specs on the 'copter flicker holographically through the shattered remains of the driver's side window. It's a McDonnell-Douglas/Sikorsky dual-rotor,

*We drift down the street,
faster and faster, until it
is no longer boring; until, in fact,
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I skin my lips back from my teeth,
and my teeth are dry
instantly.*

turboshaft Cheops, designed to assist in field-pacification campaigns by dropping full-scale sports stadiums into remote guerrilla-controlled locations.

"What do you suppose its max load is?" Dolores peers out of the windshield at the whale of the helicopter. Its two rotors gleam like nebulae in the reflected light of the city. The interactive logos of sponsoring pro-ball teams covering its belly can just be heard shouting the dates of upcoming games.

Finally irritated into action by the freeloader, it unlimbers a UV-cutting laser. A spot on the sandbug's line glows red, then flares white. The line parts. Instead of falling, the sandbug deploys an emergency hang-glider and sails serenely off across the L.A. basin, several hours cut off its evening commute. I'd forgotten how much fun it was just to have a regular job and go home at the end of the day.

"Honey, that thing picked Fenway Park up and set it down on top of a Skindancer training camp in Yucatan without popping a gasket."

"Yeah, and the Mayan guerrillas converted it into a ceremonial ball court, with the big stone rings. They sacrifice the losers in the sky boxes and let the blood drip down the carpeted stairs ..."

"I'm not sure that the loss of an American League franchise, tragic though it was, is relevant to your concern about the load capacity of the Cheops —"

Exploded cross-sections of hydraulic landing legs and ergonomic pilot's lower-back massage pads swell in fly's-eye multiplicity through the fragments of window. Dolores thumbs the display off.

"The turbo-assist won't be enabled," she says decisively. "The damn

things have three hours of downtime for every hour of operation. They don't need that extra lift for a puny little Winnebago, now do they, honey? And without the turbo-assist, a Winnebago is barely within spec for it. Big maintenance money for the contractor. Isn't that a damn shame? Somebody should do something."

Her chipper tone makes me nervous. Dolores tends to fragment under stress, and I recognize this subordinate personality, one that often shows up in such circumstances, a cocktail-shaker-meatloaf-and-pineapple-chunk homemaker she bought from a street vendor while on vacation in New Orleans. It's got a strong somatic component: her breasts suddenly look conical and her eyebrows arch as if savagely plucked.

"I suppose not," I say.

"That's great, honey. But I need to give that 'copter a false read. Before your first Manhattan, that's a dear. It's GPS-satellite linked. Adjust the timing on the location signal and ... " Her tone gets low, suggestive. "I'll do that thing you like."

That thing I like ... It's been so long, I'm no longer even sure what that is.

V.
THE MARINA ROAD HUGS THE SIDE OF THE RESERVOIR
WHICH GLOWS REACTOR-POOL, BLUE
WITH THE LIGHTS OF SUBMERGED CAMPERS
EVADEING INCOMPREHENSIBLE EMANATIONS
FROM A HOSTILE GALAXY

I lay sweating on the Formica kitchen table. My vestibular system spins and I almost throw up again. But my mission is accomplished. We've ducted the helicopter's orientation process and sent it south of its projected path. Lake Meade now lies below us. The once-populous RV hookups on its shores are now occupied by oxygen pumps supporting the subsurface colonies.

"Yucca Flat," I gasp. "That's where they built it, you know. Company HQ. Right under the nuclear waste disposal site, shielded from detection by a 50-meter layer of vitrified plutonium waste. HQ is powered by a self-contained, sodium-cooled breeder reactor, a portable spinoff of the French Superphénix program, bought on the promise to the Ministry of Culture that we'd practice French conjugations daily."

The control panels were all in incomprehensible pseudo-Frenchophone *ordinateur*-speak, and several near-detonations had already led to some raucous TGIM (Thank God It's Meltdown) parties among the younger Company staffers. I miss the security of my training days there.

"That's nice, dear." Dolores flips up her welding mask, having cut a hole through the Winnebago's rear door. She kicks open an equipment closet, her spike heel leaving a deep dent. Revealed is a gigantic roll of hose. "Could you feed that out? There's a good boy."

You could pour her voice on pancakes. I do as she says, letting the hose slither out through the hole.

Dolores peers out of the rear window. "Come on, you bastard," she mutters. "Just a little lower, yes, just a little — yes!"

She flips a switch and the roar of a pump starts up somewhere in the wall. Reservoir water gets sucked up, pouring into the reserve water tank. But Dolores has opened the clean-out hatch. The tank fills in moments, and then water pours out of the hatch.

"There, that wasn't so hard, was it?" Dolores smiles toothily at me. "Let's tuck into some chop suey and watch Ed Sullivan. I love that talking mouse, don't you?"

Water begins to fill the rear of the Winnebago. We claw our way up the increasingly slanted hallway to the seats in front. Kitchen cabinets fly open, flinging cans of okra and creamed corn at our heads. Dolores makes it, I don't. While she rests back in her control couch, I find myself dangling from the rear of my seat. Water swirls beneath my feet.

"Not long now," she says. Overhead, I hear the helicopter laboring at the unexpected weight. Servos scream in protest. The ripples of the reservoir surface approach my feet. Deep within, I can

see the gleam of the luminescent giant squid the subaqueous campers keep to protect their coolers from marauding bass. Their many limbs gesture at me, wig-wagging obsolete semaphore codes that represent the power of the Company. I should let go, drop down into that informational morass, rejoin the symbolic propagations that are the Company ...

The rear of the Winnebago hits the water. I lose my grip on the seat back, and fall down into the whirlpool. As the water pours in, I see the helicopter swing, held tight by its line, until one of its rotors touches the water's surface. It smashes in then, blades ripping loose and flying through the air.

Dolores pushes a button on the panel. There is a brief rumble as irritated campers disturbed at their submerged rest pond on the undercarriage. An algae-covered hand rises from the water and gives us the finger, as well as it can webbed to the second joint. The vehicle rights itself and we churn along, powered by water jets. I struggle to my feet. The Company. It almost had me ... I look down at my shoe, which is marked by a line of large squid suckers. I must have kicked my way free, without even knowing it. Dolores beams at me. She pulls off the fins she was putting on, if I needed saving. She is fetching in a pink bathing cap with a plastic gardenia appliqué.

She slaps the dashboard. "This thing's the finest Detroit metal, Kalhorn. Not one of those pesky Japanese things you see all over. Look like a halfball the cat barfed up."

"Speaking of which," I say, "any of your famous chop suey left?" It's the only way. Really.

"Do that thing you like yourself then, you bastard!"

"Actually, that's the way I like it best."

Furious, she finds the silver cocktail shaker where it rolls back and forth in the muck on the floor and chugs directly from it, while driving with one hand.

The Winnebago hits shore and we climb up on solid ground. It will be a while before she talks to me, but she'll be fine when she does. She really should get that personality adjusted, but she's afraid of screwing with it. The thing is a classic.

VI.
THE TWO-LANE BLACKTOP STRETCHES OUT AHEAD
LETTING US KNOW THAT
THERE ARE SOME DREAMS THAT NEVER DIE

It's deep, dark night and we thunder along the road, the Winnebago rocking gently.

"You still haven't told me," she said.

"What?" The broken segments of the center line blink hypnotically at me in the headlights.

"Why you left me."

"You know why ... you know, it's different, it's not like I told you. The Company, I mean. That business about Yucca Flat. I've been stuck in my dorm room, you know, busy. Not up to working through the kinked logic connections of those damn gigabyte, hypertext, interoffice memos they kept sending me."

She doesn't say anything, just looks forward and drives.

"The Company is distributed-function now, run out of strip-mall offices with wood-grain vinyl walls, out of rented desks at the back of cleaning services. That evil-smelling derelict you see at the bus station feeding begged quarters into the TV on the chair arm could be a VP tapping into the Information Department network. IR beams concealed in stop lights carry football pool data invaluable in maintaining corporate *esprit de corps*. As distributed as the nervous system of a sea squirt, the Company is completely invulnerable!"

"There is no Company, Kalhorn," she says softly.

"They'll catch us yet!" I yell. "Put us in a holding cell in the back of a car wash in Hurricane, Utah, one of their countless distributed nodes. Right behind the new-car-smell spray machine in a personal-regression pseudo-womb lined with abdominal adipose tissue sucked up in a thousand Company-run storefront liposuction clinics and transported by heated tanker trucks disguised as

asphalt spreaders. We'll be reprogrammed there, and reborn, thrust out onto the oil-soaked concrete, to work out our indentures by auto detailing with Q-Tips. You know, they make you polish up the goddamn distributor rotors, dock your pay if you don't, and you can't even see them whizzing around in there, sparking the contacts ..."

"There is no Company. And cars don't have distributors any more."

"I used to cry when I sang the Company song. I used to cry ... I loved you Dolores. You know I did. I just couldn't hump a pack up another goddamn mountain ..."

"Sure, Kalhorn. I understand. But you never were allergic to Gore-Tex, were you?"

"Yeah, well, I made that up."

Something bleebles, and a warning panel rises up through the cracked vinyl of the dashboard. Little arrows swirl wildly around on the display.

"Stealth ground-attack plane," Dolores says, as if telling me dinner's ready. "Invisible to radar, of course. But particulate doppler can still show the air flow lines around it."

Now that she has said it, I can see the looming torpedo shape, like a ghost. The damn thing's the size of a zeppelin, cutting through the thin air at 40,000 feet. I lean back and look out the window.

"Yep," I say. "And there's the ground-targeting sensor. We're dead meat, sweetheart." I point. It's a tiny, rotary-wing saucer whirling just a few feet above the radio aerial. The atmosphere's lousy with the things, they're like plankton, and already giant inlet-scooped aircraft are being developed that can feed on them, like krill-sifting baleen whales, tiny automated machine-shops in their bellies disassembling and storing the valuable parts.

"Take the wheel, Kalhorn."

"You know I hate that."

"Take it!"

She strolls back into the Winnebago's kitchen, as cool as if she's just going back there to fry up a kimchi burger. I slide into the driver's seat.

"Still think the Company doesn't exist?" I say, pleased at this new evidence.

"Anybody can hire an assault craft," she says. "All you need is a valid credit card and a government-registered grudge. You cleaned out our accounts when you left, remember? You must have about drained the cash by now, hiring surveillance satellites and heavy-lift 'copters. You never could keep to a budget." A framework of carbon-composite rods slides out of what should be the ironing board closet. How, then, does she keep her clothes so neat and pressed? A wonder, my Dolores.

"To commit a fancy form of suicide?"

"Damn right." She pulls a helmet down over her head. A hatch slides open in the roof, and the roar of air makes it hard for me to think. She reaches up and gets her hands on a translucent glass cylinder that looks like a stack of CDs.

But she's right. I know she's right. She's always been right. One of the reasons I left, actually. One of the reasons I created the Company to defend myself ...

VII
THE BRIDGE ARCHES GRACEFULLY OVER THE CANYON
ITS CURVES AS SWEET AS A DANCER'S RUMP —
BE GRATEFUL TO A TECHNOLOGY THAT
ALLOWS US TO BE AROUSED BY PRESTRESSED CONCRETE

"You're right, Dolores!" I shout. It's an erotic feeling, and I wonder why it always takes me so long to finally say it.

"Shush now." Her voice is quiet. "I have a job to do." Her head leans

against the glass cylinder. She seems to be counting to herself. "Hang on. This'll drain all the power we've got."

The tube flickers and glows. Then, with a sudden hiss of ionized air, a vivid straight line of blue-green laser gets drawn across the sky.

A tangle of arrows, and the dashboard display shows nothing but straight lines. Then it goes blank, the vehicle bucks, and the engine goes dead. The right tires leave the road, thunder on the gravel shoulder. I hang desperately on to the wheel, wrestling it with all my strength, power steering gone. I have the control centers in my brain, I've been exercising them transcontinentally for years, but the muscles they control have unaccountably gone slack. I feel my body hanging off my bones like overcooked pot roast. But they're all back in my body, controlling the things they were evolved to control. It feels good.

"Damn," I say, as the vehicle drifts to a halt. "They'll get us for sure now."

"Who?"

*With a thunder that shakes
the ground, the blazing
wreckage of the stealth craft
suddenly rips through the
sky over our heads and slams
into the delicate span of
the bridge.*

It's a piercingly clear desert morning. The sun is coming up behind the rocks, and every crack is vivid.

"You know where I want to go," Dolores says.

"Yes." I sigh. It's a hard hike, up a canyon, into the high plateaus ... I went to a lot of work to avoid it, but I guess I just can't. It will make Dolores happy, at least.

With a thunder that shakes the ground, the blazing wreckage of the stealth craft suddenly rips through the sky over our heads and slams into the delicate span of the bridge. Dolores ducks against me and I hold her, watching blazing metal and shattered concrete tumble into the depths of the narrow canyon. A minute, and everything is as silent as it was, and I can hear the delicate dry winds sifting dust between the armored tiers of the Winnebago.

"Get your shoes on, Kalhorn," Dolores says. "Fill your pack. We're going on a hike."

I see it, a narrow span of the bridge left hanging above the canyon, just wide enough for a hiker to stride on. It's as irresistible as a rainbow.

"All right," I say. "All right."

Dolores is already sliding her hiking boots on over thick green ribbed socks, folded crisply down over her ankles. She has great calves. Dolores really knows the secret. Whatever happens, you're halfway to solving it if you have the right footwear. From henceforward, this truth will help guide my life.

I drop battered cans of okra into my pack and get ready for the hike. □





Pierre Caillou's space mission was routine, yet what he discovered would change the world forever.

FROM A STONE

BY ERIC CHOI

Illustration by Gary Freeman

STONE.
Cold, hard, unimaginably ancient stone. A rough, irregular aggregate of it, angular, cratered, pockmarked, and pitted. The stone was dark, with an albedo of less than 5 percent. It tumbled lazily about its major axis with a rotation period of 19 hours, 53 minutes. A third of it was frozen in shadow, while the rest roasted in the incessant light of the Sun. It was only ten by five by four kilometers in major dimension — on the scale of the Solar System, literally microscopic.

But the stone was not too small to escape human curiosity.

"Hold at three hundred meters for IPS parameter update." The voice of pilot Ben Dixon came over Pierre Caillou's spacesuit radio. Dixon and the mission commander, Poornima Bhupai, were monitoring the EVA from the bridge of the UNSDA spacecraft *Harrison Schmitt*.

The astronaut-geologist entered the command into his manned maneuvering unit. "OK, Ben," Pierre replied. "Hold at three hundred meters." He glanced to his left and right. Diane Sokolowski and Marvin Shipley, the other geologists from the *Schmitt*, were flying in formation with him, both piloting their own MMU thruster packs.

The asteroid's bulk loomed ever larger as the astronauts approached. Pierre kept an eye on his lidar rangefinder. At that precise moment a nitrogen jet fired, putting his MMU in an attitude-hold mode three hundred meters from the surface.

"I am holding at three hundred meters," Pierre said. His colleagues reported the same.

"Copy," Ben replied. "Transmission of IPS updates will commence in five seconds ... Mark! Note the new basis vectors are for an asteroid-based frame of reference, with the origin located at the geographic center of 2021-PK."

"Understood." A green light on Pierre's inertial positioning system blinked. "My IPS reports updated. State vectors received and installed." Diane and Marvin reported their navigation units also were ready.

Ben enunciated his next words formally. "To EVA crew, I have the

We'll let Darmstadt know of the change. But don't be too long. Time's not on our side, and we're behind schedule already."

"Thanks, Ben," Pierre turned to Diane. "All right. Let's go." Puffs of nitrogen sent them skyward from their perch on the rim to a point above the inner crater.

"It doesn't look round," Diane observed.

"No, it doesn't." Pierre activated his lidar rangefinder. "I am getting a uniform depth sounding. It is not a circular depression."

"Ben, for Diane and Pierre."

"Yes, what is it?" Diane sounded irritated.

"Uh, sorry to bother you, but Darmstadt wants to inform you the back-room boys are getting restless." The "boys" were the geologists monitoring the expedition from their own room at Mission Control in Darmstadt, Germany. EVA schedules were as tightly scripted as

"This sounds crazy, but Ben ... I don't believe phenomenon. This is something alien."

following messages from the CAPCOM and Commander Bhupal Darmstadt is 'go,' Schmitt is 'go.' You are cleared for final approach to 2021-PK. This is the last hurrah, people. Make it good."

"Understood." Pierre's aft thrusters fired a short burst, putting him in motion once more. The dark surface of the asteroid rushed up to him. Pierre executed a pitch-back maneuver to put his feet "down" before the negative y-axis thrusters came on to slow his touchdown. "... 20 meters ... 10 ... 5 ... 1 ... Contact!"

"I have contact also."

"We're down!" Marvin and Diane said in turn.

Pierre surveyed the magnificently desolate scene about him. "They say you can't draw blood from a stone —"

"But you can always get knowledge!" Diane's exuberant voice cut in. They would later swear it was not rehearsed.

The astronauts went about gathering samples, hopping across the asteroid like grasshoppers. Pierre presently found himself near one of 2021-PK's larger craters. He decided to sample the rim material, and his MMU dutifully delivered him to the edge. As he readied his tools and glanced at the bottom of the crater, he noticed something unusual.

The Sun was shining at an angle across the impact, producing a semicircular shadow that bisected the bottom of the bowl. At the top of the arc, a second, smaller semicircle jutted out from the shadow. There appeared to be another crater at the bottom of the larger, but somehow it didn't look right.

"Pierre for Diane."

"Go ahead."

"Have a look at this." He transmitted his camera video.

"That's interesting," Diane replied after watching Pierre's feed on her multifunction visor. "I'm coming to have a look."

Moments later, she landed beside him.

"So, what do you think?" Pierre asked.

"Looks like another crater."

"That's what I thought. But look at the edge. It's not very circular. In fact, it's pretty ragged."

"Must be really old," Diane concluded. "A few billion years of dust and micrometeoroid impact will do that."

"Of course. But look at the larger crater." Pierre's hand swept out a curve. "The rim is smooth. That smaller crater is on top of this larger one, so the smaller one must be more recent. So how could it have experienced more degradation than the older, larger impact?"

"I don't know," Diane said.

"Pierre for Ben. Are you seeing this?"

"Affirmative," Ben replied from the distant Schmitt. "Nima and I concur with your assessment, but we don't have any new ideas."

"We should have a look," Diane suggested.

There was a pause as Ben consulted the commander. "All right.

Shakespeare, and the three-day time line for the survey of 2021-PK was particularly tight. The message was a subtle hint for Pierre and Diane to get back on track.

Diane gave Pierre the hand signal to switch to a private channel. "Oh, for crying out loud. We're not automatons. If they wanted robots, they should have damn well sent them!"

Pierre switched back to the common log. "Ben, we were scheduled to sample the bottoms of a few craters tomorrow. There's no harm in getting started today. Besides, we seem to have something rather unusual here."

"Yeah, I can see that." A pause. "OK, go ahead. Nima says she'll try to smooth any ruffled feathers back home."

"Thanks," Diane said.

They descended until they hovered right over the opening. "Look at the edges!" Diane pointed. "It's definitely not circular. It looks kind of like ... a rounded-off pentagon or something."

"Well, this is certainly not a crater," Pierre said. "I am reading a depth of four hundred and fifty meters. This is a ... tunnel." He switched channels. "Pierre for Marvin."

"Go ahead."

"Take a look at this." Pierre sent him the video.

The Canadian astronaut sounded puzzled. "I don't know. Could be a lava tube. But on a rock this small? Beats me, Pierre. I'm just a prairie boy from Manawaka."

Pierre played a light down the hole, but the darkness swallowed it. "I want to go to the bottom. Ben?"

"Pierre —"

"Ben," Diane cut in. "Tell Nima to tell the back-room boys to cool it. We've got something really worth ... ahem, looking into here. Look, just let him have a quick look-see. OK?"

Ben sighed. "Very well. You stay outside to relay Pierre's signal. Be careful, OK?"

"That goes without saying," Pierre replied dryly. He started his MMU and plunged into the unknown. His suit lamp produced a small circle of illumination that tracked down the wall as he descended. It was pitted and scarred from billions of years of micrometeoroid and dust impact, but the surface did not seem as coarse as the outside of the asteroid.

Pierre stopped. "One hundred meters down. I'm going to take a sample of the wall."

Another sample was taken at the two-hundred-meter mark. By now, Pierre was certain there was something strange about the tunnel. There are fewer signs of geologic modification now. There is less evidence of erosion and wear. He touched the rock. "In fact, it feels almost ... a little flat."

"Uh, copy," Ben replied.

Pierre resumed his descent. As the wall scrolled by, it became apparent that it was not only becoming flatter, but the surface was smoothing out as well. It was like a beach, where the rough sand trampled by innumerable feet merged into the smooth area washed by the waves.

He stopped at three hundred meters for another sample. The geologist ran his hand along the wall. With the exception of a few dents created by micrometeoroids that had managed to get this far, the wall felt uniform. He transmitted his video to Diane.

"What do the other surfaces look like?"

"Other surfaces?" The obvious hit him with a start. All this time, he had blithely assumed the tunnel was circular. But if he were staring at a flat surface, this clearly could not be the case. He rotated his MMU.

this is a natural

There was a corner — and another, and another. Six in total, formed by the intersection of the walls. "This tunnel ... it is not circular! It is a hexagon!"

"How can that be?" Ben asked.

"That's ... incredible," Diane breathed. "But at least it explains one thing. This opening isn't really any older than the outside crater. It just looks like it had experienced more modification because it's really an eroded hexagon instead of a circle."

"I'm going straight to the bottom," Pierre announced as he started his MMU. The smooth walls scrolled by as the display on his rangefinder counted down. But just three meters from the bottom, his suit lamp seemed to black out. "What —" he began, but his feet were already touching bottom.

He rebounded off the floor before his MMU went into attitude-hold. The asteroid's feeble gravity made it impossible to really "stand," so Pierre just floated a few centimeters above the rock.

"I am at the bottom." He looked down at where his feet had touched, and to his surprise discovered his lamp had not malfunctioned. The light revealed a small circle of rock, marred only by a handful of impacts. Puzzled, he looked up again — and gasped. "Mon Dieu!"

"Pierre, what is it?" Ben asked urgently. "What the hell is that in front of you?"

"There is another tunnel in front of me. The opening is ... hexagonal." He checked the lidar. "It is two hundred and thirty meters deep." He turned, and counted five other walls. Each one had an opening identical to the first.

"Oh my God," Diane whispered.

"What's this?" Marvin barked. "What's going on? Pierre!"

"Cut the chatter on the loop!" Ben snapped. "Pierre. What is your appraisal of this formation?"

"Ben, I believe ... " Pierre swallowed. "I have no explanation at this time as to how these features were produced. This sounds crazy, but Ben ... I don't believe this is a natural phenomenon. This is something alien."

THE STONE WAS DISCOVERED BY ASTRONOMERS AT THE SHAPLEY Observatory on the lunar farside, and was given the designation 2021-PK after the year, half-month, and order of its discovery. Its highly elliptical orbit had a period of 136.9 years, and was inclined eighteen point three degrees to the ecliptic. This seemed to suggest the object was a spent comet. But some astronomers believed 2021-PK was a visitor from beyond the Kuiper Belt, an extrasolar body captured by the Sun when it experienced just enough gravitational perturbation to close its hyperbolic trajectory into an ellipse.

The United Nations Space Development Agency proposed a mission to 2021-PK, but politics and funding conspired against it. Fortu-

nately, the laws of celestial mechanics offered an alternative. One UNSDA spacecraft — the *Harrison Schmitty* — was already in solar orbit, finishing a survey of Apollo-class asteroids. Through a bit of orbital legerdemain, the ship was diverted to rendezvous with 2021-PK at the point it crossed the ecliptic on its ascending node, exiting the inner Solar System.

It was hardly an ideal situation. The *Schmitt* was already at the end of its nominal flight. Its crew had to ration their supplies of food and oxygen to support the extended mission to 2021-PK. Furthermore, the unfavorable rendezvous geometry consumed so much fuel the astronauts were left with just three days to study the asteroid. After three days, the burn window would close, and the *Schmitt* would no longer be able to make an Earth-return trajectory.

But a hit-and-run mission was better than none. The astronomers and geologists were used to the compromises inherent in "government science." They consoled themselves in the belief that the only unique thing about 2021-PK was its orbit, and that it probably wasn't much different than the dozens of asteroids the *Schmitt* had already surveyed.

Then Pierre Caillou discovered the Beehive.

THE FLIGHT CONTROLLERS IN DARMSTADT WERE IN A CONUNDRUM. They were, after all, trained to deal with mechanical failures and schedule problems, not first contact. Despite the looming departure deadline, Darmstadt cautiously decided to forbid further exploration until the appropriate authorities were consulted. The EVA astronauts were instructed to return to the *Schmitt* until new orders were issued.

While awaiting their arrival, Commander Poornima Bhupal watched the video again. "It's like a beehive."

"Huh?"

"A beehive," she repeated.

"Yeah, I thought so too."

"What do you think ... " She gestured at the screen. "What do you think this is? Who were they? What does it all mean?"

Ben shrugged. "How the hell do I know?" He turned to another monitor. "They're back. I'm opening the airlock." He left the bridge to help the geologists doff their spacesuits. When that was completed, the crew gathered on the bridge.

"What's the plan?" Pierre asked.

"We're waiting for instructions from Darmstadt," Bhupal said.

"When can we expect that?" asked Marvin.

"Should be any time now, I hope."

Moments later, Ben announced, "Incoming message."

Jason Ho, the CAPCOM on duty, appeared on the screen. "Commander Bhupal, crew of the *Schmitt*." He was obviously reading from a prepared statement. "On behalf of everyone here at Mission Control, Flight Director Pearson, the engineers, the scientists, geologists ... indeed, on behalf of all the people of Earth, I congratulate you on this remarkable discovery. This is a truly momentous occasion. Human history has been altered ..."

Diane silently mouthed "blah, blah, blah."

"... will never be the same. But precisely because the nature of your discovery — proof of extraterrestrial life — is so extraordinary, it becomes necessary to take extraordinary precautions. We must act very carefully, for we do not know the consequences of any mistakes."

"As of now, 22:43 hours, the SETI Protocol is in effect. The Secretary General and the First Minister have been notified. A tiger team of engineers and scientists from all UNSDA centers is being assembled to recommend the next course of action. But any such action must first be approved by the Peace and Security Council. So, until the PSC makes policy, the crew of the *Schmitt* is ordered not to attempt another EVA. You will hold your position until further instructions, which you will receive shortly."

Jason stopped reading, and his expression changed. He now addressed his fellow astronauts, his friends. "Nina, Ben, Diane, Marvin, Pierre ... hang in there, OK? We'll figure this out."

The screen went blank.

"Further instructions shortly. Right," Diane turned to Marvin. "By the way, what time is it?"

"22:50."

"No, I mean in New York."

"It's ... what? Three or four in the morning, I think."

Pierre saw what Diane was getting at. "Oh, no."

"Oh, no is right. They're all in bed. It'll take hours just to wake them up, get them their coffee and doughnuts, put them in a room ... Then they'll yak for hours more." Diane clenched her fists. "Further instructions shortly. *Right*. There's classic government science for you. We'll be lucky if we're left with even a day to explore!"

"Well," Pierre said, "while we're waiting, perhaps we could analyze —"

"You will do nothing of the sort," Bhupal interjected. "I want the three of you to get *some* rest." She emphasized the last three words with jabs of her finger. "When the powers-that-be *finally* decide our next move, I want all of you to be refreshed and ready to go as soon as the word is given. We have only two more days here and we must make the most of them. Understood?"

"Sure," Marvin said. Pierre nodded, and Diane murmured in agreement.

"All right. Grab a bite to eat, maybe. But then you hit the sack."

The geologists gathered in the *Schmitt's* galley. Pierre and Marvin both prepared meals, but their appetites were wholly divergent. Marvin attacked his food with the vigor of a starving man, while Pierre poked and prodded at his tray, eating very little.

Diane's eyes wandered back and forth between them. "How can you guys think of food at a time like this?"

"Actually, I'm not hungry," Pierre put down his fork.

Marvin swallowed. "Hey, what's wrong? I'm within my ration."

"I just think it's a little ... weird," Diane shrugged. "I mean, here we are. We've just discovered proof of intelligent extraterrestrial life, and what's the first thing we do? Graze."

"Wait a minute," Marvin wiped his mouth. "Did you just say 'intelligent life'?"

"Yeah."

"Uh, sorry Di. I have to disagree with you."

She smiled. "Oh?"

"I know what I saw," Pierre said. "You've all seen the video. Those caverns were *definitely* not natural."

"Oh, I'm not disagreeing with that," said Marvin. "They're alien, no doubt about it. But whether the builders — the aliens themselves — whether they were intelligent ... now *that* remains to be seen."

"But the shape, those walls ..." Diane shook her head. "How could something build something like the Beehive and not be intelligent?"

"Beehive?"

"Beehive asteroid," Diane explained. "That's what the media's calling 2021-PK."

"Beehive ..." Marvin mused. "Yeah, that's good. See, you don't have to be smart to build complicated things. Just like bees. Sure, they build complex *hexagonal* hives, but they're as dumb as pos. On the other hand, whales don't build anything, and they're probably smarter than I am."

"That's a good point, Marvin," Pierre said. "But it raises another question. What would you consider as *proof* of intelligence?"

"Math," Diane replied immediately.

Pierre nodded. "OK. Perhaps even music then, since it is very much a mathematical construction."

"Like whale song," Marvin suggested.

"Exactly," said Pierre. "Something to do with math. In fact, one of the mathematicians — I think it was Gauss — once suggested that a giant representation of Pythagoras' Theorem be put in the Alps in hopes of signaling any Martians."

Marvin shrugged. "Well, I hope you two aren't too disappointed, but that asteroid isn't exactly spouting calculus and Chopin."

Commander Bhupal entered the galley. "What are you still doing here? Talking? The people on Earth are talking. New York is talking. *You* should not be talking. You should be resting, so when they stop talking, you'll be ready to go."

The geologists laughed. "I'm off," Marvin announced as he left the galley. Diane did the same, throwing up her hands in mock surrender.

Pierre retired to his cubicle. He told the lights to dim, climbed into his sack, and shut his eyes. Sleep came almost immediately.

He dreamed.

He saw himself floating through one of those hexagonal tunnels. It was pitch dark, with only a small circle of light from his lamp to show the way. The tunnel took a turn, and he pushed himself off a wall to change direction as he had so many times before in the passageways of spacecraft. But this was no spacecraft — at least, not a human one.

The tunnel abruptly ended, and he found himself in a large cavern. He played his light along the walls and discovered the openings of four other tunnels. Where he had expected a fifth, there was something else.

It was a humanoid figure.

He approached. The being was imbedded in the rock itself, like a

The creature wore a like a multifunction

relief sculpture carved into the wall. It was about his height and build, dressed in a garment that resembled some kind of spacesuit. He tugged at the figure, but it could not be dislodged.

The creature wore a helmet, the front of which was shielded by a unit like a multifunction visor. Pierre put out his hand and raised it.

There was a face.

It was his own.

FOURTEEN HOURS AFTER THE INITIAL DISCOVERY, THE PSC REACHED A decision. The relatively prompt action of the Council was, even Diane admitted, something of a miracle. Nevertheless, there were now just two more days before the *Schmitt's* window for its vital trans-Earth injection burn closed.

After eating his breakfast ration, Pierre joined the crew on the bridge to hear the outcome of the PSC's emergency session. On a monitor, CAPCOM Oleg Soloyovov read the communiqué.

"The Peace and Security Council of the United Nations has reached a decision on Resolution 2036-57, sponsored by the United Nations Space Development Agency, requesting the further exploration of the extraterrestrial features found inside asteroid 2021-PK. The result of the vote was as follows ..."

"Oh, forget the breakdown," Diane groaned.

"Hey," Marvin hushed her. "I'm interested."

"In favor: China, the European Union, Russia, Israel-Palestine, India, Japan. Opposed: Brazil —"

Cheers erupted on the bridge.

"— and the United African Republics. Canada and the United States abstained. Resolution 2036-57 was thereby approved."

"Here come the provisos," Ben cautioned.

"Further exploration of asteroid 2021-PK is authorized, subject to the following conditions and precautions: During EVA, Pilot Benjamin Dixon shall be stationed in the airlock, fully suited, ready to exit on short notice. Commander Bhupal shall act as the bridge intravehicular crew member in his place. All EVA crew, as well as Pilot Dixon, shall carry a heavy-duty laserdrill on their person at all times while outside the spacecraft."

"Activities on the asteroid itself shall be subject to the following conditions and precautions: One EVA crew member shall station himself or herself at the end of the entrance tunnel. The remaining crew members may then enter one of the secondary tunnels, but both must enter the *same* tunnel and stay together at all times."

"The contingency EVA tether shall be used for communications by crew inside the asteroid. Under no circumstances are EVA crew to exceed the range limits imposed by the tethers. They are to gather as much information as possible while exercising extreme caution. This is humanity's first contact with extraterrestrial intelligence — the importance of your mission cannot be overstated. Further infor-

ation and instructions will be uplinked as required. This transmission ends ... now."

"Extraterrestrial intelligence ...," Marvin shook his head.

"These so-called precautions," Diane sneered. "They're silly."

"Perhaps they're a little conservative," Pierre agreed. "But for the time being, we shall follow them."

"All right, people!" exclaimed Commander Bhupal. "We haven't much time. Let's get moving!"

Forty-five minutes later, Diane, Marvin, and Pierre returned to the rocky surface of the asteroid. A communications relay was stationed at the mouth of the entrance tunnel. Pierre and Diane descended to the end of the shaft first, while Marvin hitched his tether to the comm unit before following.

helmet, the front of which was shielded by a unit visor.... There was a face. It was his own.

"Comm check on relay," Marvin said.

"Good comm check," Bhupal replied. "Please proceed."

The astronauts doffed their MBUs and anchored them to the walls. Diane then tethered herself to Marvin. Pierre would remain a free-floater. After a final check of their suits and equipment, Marvin announced, "OK Nina, we're ready to go."

"Copy. Be careful ... and good luck."

Marvin surveyed the secondary entrances. "Well, take your pick." "Enie, meanie, minie, moe ...," Diane recited. Nervous chuckles echoed over the loop.

"Let's take this one," Pierre suggested, indicating the opening he happened to be closest to.

"As good as any," Diane said. "Let's go."

It was a historic moment, and Pierre wished he and Diane could come up with another memorable phrase. They could not, so he said simply, "We are going in."

"Good luck," said Marvin.

"Darmstadt — and I — also wish you good luck," Commander Bhupal said. "And ... be careful."

Pierre went in first, followed by Diane trailing the thin, threadlike communications tether. "The walls are similar to those observed in the outer entrance tunnel," Pierre reported. "They are hexagonal. They are also quite smooth."

Diane stopped. "Pierre, hold on a sec."

"Yes?"

"Let's quantify that statement. Let's see how smooth this really is," She produced a gauge and ran it along a wall. "I've got a 5-millimeter deviation over a 30-centimeter length." She ran it along another wall. "Six over thirty here."

"Measure the angle between the walls," Pierre suggested.

"OK. The angle between the walls is ... fairly close to thirty degrees," Diane reported. "Not exactly." She pointed. "This one is twenty-seven point five degrees, while that one's twenty-eight point one. There's an error of plus or minus three degrees."

"Marvin for Diane. You sound a little disappointed."

"Doesn't matter, Marv. These walls were machined. They had to have been. And you need smarts to run a machine."

"Nima for EVA crew. Please leave your speculations for later. Pierre, Darmstadt requests more samples."

The back-room boys again. "Right, Nina. Thank you. I was just going to do that." Pierre put aside the PSC-mandated laserdrill and produced a hammer and chisel. He brought them up to the wall and was about to strike, when he paused. Even if Marvin was right, that the beings who dug these tunnels had the brains of a maggot, it didn't diminish the fact that this was an alien artifact. Pierre felt a little bit like a vandal.

But he took the sample anyway.

They continued. The tunnel took a turn, and Pierre experienced a moment of *déjà vu* as he and Diane pushed off a wall to match the curve. The feeling intensified when they emerged from the tube.

"We're in some kind of chamber," Pierre reported. "It is roughly spherical, but the walls are not finished as they were in the passageways." He panned the camera. "There are entrances to other tunnels. However, they are not distributed in any regular pattern." Two were fairly close together, while the rest were scattered in random positions.

"Nima for EVA crew. It's time to call it a day. Diane and Pierre, finish what you're doing and start heading back."

Pierre checked his oxygen gauge. "OK, Nina. Understand it's a wrap." He took a final sample, then panned the camera about one last time. "All right Diane, time to go home."

"Uh, OK."

Pierre started back, but Diane did not follow immediately. "Diane?" He switched to a private channel. "Is there something you want to say?"

A pause. "No."

Two hours later, the geologists were back aboard the *Schmitt*. After a quick supper of ration packs, they went to the lab to do a preliminary analysis of their data.

"You know," Marvin began, "this rock would be a bundle of mysteries even without the alien thing."

Diane feigned innocence. "Why are you looking at me?"

Pierre asked, "You are certain about the age?"

"No question," Marvin consulted his palmtop. "Two point eight billion years."

"Younger than the Solar System," Pierre mused. "Meaning —"

"Meaning it *did* come from outside the Solar System," Diane concluded.

"Maybe," Marvin said, "there's something else." He told the computer to project a photographic image of the asteroid above the table. The potato-like rock floated whole before their eyes for a moment before the computer sliced it in half, revealing Marvin's model of the internal structure in cross-section.

"I based this on the samples you took inside the caverns and the surface measurements made by the remotes. The surface is composed of a thin veneer of achondrites, while the bulk of the asteroid itself is composed of metamorphosed chondrites." The color scale changed. "However, as we go deeper, we find that the percentage of siderophile elements is increasing —"

"Iron," Pierre interrupted. "Stony-iron materials."

"Yes," said Marvin.

Pierre bridged his fingers. "How much?"

"From the surface to the deepest point you and Diane sampled, there's an increase of nine point one percent, within an error of —"

"That much?" Diane exclaimed. "But we didn't go that far down!"

"The asteroid is differentiated," Pierre concluded. "It has physically and chemically stratified zones. But how? It's so small."

Marvin shrugged. "It could've been heated to a molten state sometime in the past. But you're right, its gravity should have been too weak to sift the elements as it came back together. If it did, though, it would've reset the isotopes. It could be a lot older than we measured. Maybe it was formed in the Solar System after all."

"But what could have provided the heat?" Diane asked.

"Planetesimal bombardment, maybe?" Marvin suggested.

"Could be," Pierre pointed. "But look at how young it looks. There are very few large impacts."

"What about radiogenic heating?" asked Diane.

Marvin shook his head. "No, this rock's cold. No sign of radioactive

decay. And the magnetic field's only a few hundredths of a gauss."

Diane smiled. "You know Marv, I think you're right. This rock would be just as interesting without those alien tunnels." She became serious. "But they're there, and tomorrow's the last chance we'll get to study them."

She erased the cross-sectional profile, restored the asteroid to its true shape, made the image semi-transparent, and traced out a network of nodes and lines. "This is where we've been. We've only explored seven percent of those caverns."

"That percentage isn't likely to get much bigger after tomorrow," Pierre observed.

"Damn tethers," Diane muttered. "The fact is, if we follow the pattern we did today, I doubt we'll cover much more ground or learn anything new."

"What do you suggest?" Marvin asked.

"I suggest we try to go to the center of the asteroid."

Pierre stiffened.

"Di," Marvin raised his hand like a student, "may I state the obvious? There's no way you two are going to get near the core. We don't even know if the tunnels will take you there. Assuming they do, the

yes—it'll be time to go."

"Can the mission be extended again?"

Diane shook her head. "Impossible. The TEL burn window closes after tomorrow. If we don't leave then, we're never leaving." She paused. "Marvin, please. Are you in or not?"

Marvin took a deep breath. "Yeah. Count me in."

"Pierre?"

"Yes. Let's do it." He tried to smile. "Tomorrow, we'll solve all the mysteries of the Beehive asteroid, right?"

Pierre did not dream that night.

THE GEOLOGISTS DESCENDED TO THE BOTTOM OF THE ENTRANCE TUNNEL for the last time. As Pierre checked his tools, Marvin slipped Diane the extra tether spool he had smuggled out. They could have used another, but taking more might have been noticed. Since the tethers were their only link with the *Schwitt*, as long as the telemetry stream was uninterrupted there should be no suspicions until they were beyond recall.

"Are the IPS units still on the asteroid-centered coordinate system?" Diane asked.

The two had backtracked, turned, retraced, and so many times Pierre's internal sense of direction

tethers are only — Now hold on there ..."

"We might be able to reach it if we tethered in series, going in single file."

"But we don't know how those passages twist and turn," Marvin objected. "Even strung together, you probably wouldn't reach the core. Besides, the PSC guidelines clearly state that the two of you must stay together while —"

"Oh, screw them!" Diane spat. "Classic government science. They're not even here! We've only got one more EVA and we've got to make it count. I mean, let's suppose — Pierre?" She snapped her fingers. "Hey, Pierre!"

"Huh?"

"The core. What do you — Are you all right?"

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"Well ... " Pierre shrugged. "This is kind of silly, but last night ... I had this weird dream." He described it.

"That is weird," Diane breathed.

"Do you think it means anything?" asked Marvin.

Pierre shrugged again. "It was probably an anxiety dream. I have those sometimes."

"You're probably right," Diane said. "Anyway, Fred can wait. We've got bigger things to worry about." She looked at both men. "It's time we fish or cut bait. Marvin?"

"Look ... " Marvin traced a finger along the table. "It's not that I'm not curious. I am. But this isn't some movie where the rebellious officers break the rules, save the day, and end up getting promoted. It won't matter what we find down there: iron, Pierre's evil twin brother, even King Tut's tomb. Our careers will be *fixed*. We won't be punished — well, not publicly anyway. We'll be honorably retired, maybe even given a desk job if we're really lucky, but we'll never fly again. And that's if we find something. If we don't ..."

"We'll find something," Diane declared.

"That worries me, too," Marvin looked worried. "Diane, we have no idea what could be down there."

"Exactly!" she exclaimed. "If we knew, we wouldn't need to go. The point of going is to find out!"

"Why don't we ask Darmstadt first?" suggested Marvin.

"And they'll take it to New York. Another PSC meeting. More debate, more delay. By the time we get approval — assuming they say

"Yes." Pierre switched to a private channel. "This tunnel took us deepest yesterday."

"We'll start there, then," Diane switched back to the open loop. "I'm ready."

Pierre signaled the *Schwitt*. "OK, Nina. We're ready to go in."

"Copy that, Pierre. Darmstadt says 'go,' and I concur. Be careful, and good luck."

"We'll need that today," Pierre muttered. Louder, he said, "OK Marvin, see you when we get back."

"Good luck, you two."

Pierre and Diane floated into the tunnel. They stopped a hundred meters in and looked back the way they came. Diane turned the camera away and keyed a private channel. "Come on in, Marv. The water's fine."

"I'm on my way." Moments later, he was reunited with his colleagues.

The three continued in single file with Pierre in the lead, followed by Diane, with Marvin taking up the rear. They entered a cavern. Like the others before, this one presented them with five other entrances to choose from.

"Where to now?" Diane asked.

Pierre fired his lidar down each tunnel and entered the reading into his IPS. "That one."

They drifted together in the darkness for an hour before being forced to a halt. Marvin had reached the end of his tether.

"That's it for me."

"Thank you, Marvin," Diane said.

"Are you going to be all right?" Pierre asked.

Marvin's multifunction visor was in transparent mode, so his smile was visible. "Sure. Hey look, if anything comes after me ...," he hefted his laserdrill, "I'll poke their eyes out with this!"

Now Diane smiled. "They might not have eyes."

"Then ... " Marvin lowered his voice, "I'll stick it up their ass!"

Pierre and Diane pressed on. They probed the tunnels and caverns like a computer working a recursive search tree. The pair selected the likeliest branch and went as far as they could. If the path did not take them closer to the core, they returned to the last cavern and selected another. The two had backtracked, turned, retraced, and doubled back and forth so many times Pierre's internal sense of direction was completely gone. If not for the tethers and the IPS, they would have

been hopelessly lost.

Diane's tether gave out while they were in a cavern. "Oh, damn." "Well, this was hardly unexpected. Guess I'm on my own now." She started unlocking her spool. "No, don't! I'm going on myself. We agreed, remember?" "Yeah," Diane let go of the device. "Say hi to your evil twin brother for me?"

"Of course."
She bugged him. "Be careful."
"I will." Pierre released himself from the embrace. He and Diane then switched off their video feeds to the *Schwitt*.

"Nima for EVA. What's going on?"
"Uh ... our cameras are dead," Diane stammered.
"Both of you?" The commander sounded incredulous. "How can —" The voice link was also cut to avoid answering any more embarrassing questions.

"Good luck."
Pierre nodded. He entered a tunnel, and moments later emerged in another cavern. Again, there were five other entrances. Pierre probed each with the lidar, then checked the IPS and the status of his tether.

doubled back and forth was completely gone.

"Pierre for Diane. I'm only seven hundred meters from the geographic center of the asteroid, but I don't know if I'll make it. I won't if these tunnels don't take me there directly."

"Do what you can, but get a move on, OK? Nima's probably sent Ben out by now to find out what the hell we're doing."

"Right."
He was about to set off when he stopped. Something seemed different about this cavern. He panned his camera about to document the scene before diving into another tunnel.

His eyes scanned the walls of the passageway as they rushed by, and this time he was sure there was something different. He paused to run a gauge along the surface. There was only a one-millimeter deviation over a thirty-centimeter run — a far better finish than the outer tunnels. The angles between the walls were also checked. They were all thirty degrees, to within one-tenth of a degree.

Suddenly, his suit computer came on. "Warning: Check tether status." A gentle tug on the line confirmed the increase in resistance.

"Pierre for Diane. I have reached the end of my tether."
"How far are you from the core?"
"Only three hundred meters." Pierre made up his mind in an instant.

"I'm going to disengage the tether."
"That's —" The line was disconnected.

Pierre turned, pushed off a wall, and darted down the dark passage. He moved quickly without the tether. A sharp corner surprised him, but he managed to deflect his trajectory off the side without colliding.

He emerged in a cavern. His momentum carried him across the void to a far corner where two walls met. Pierre stopped himself and consulted his IPS. The reading was in single digits. He was at the core of the Beehive.

The geologist panned the camera, and when his mind assembled a complete picture from the fragmentary glimpses provided by the light, he gasped.

This place was completely different from the others. Those had been just crude hollows, without definite form or pattern. This one was, for want of a better word, a *room*. It had six equally sized walls which formed a perfect hexagon. Each wall in turn had a hexagonal tunnel opening centered on it. But curiously, the room did not have three-dimensional symmetry. There was a definite up/down orientation, a paradoxical arrangement in a weightless environment.

His heart beat faster, and he noticed he was trembling. He forced himself to stop and take a few deep breaths. Slowly, he played his light along the "ceiling." As the circle of illumination moved, more of it came into view. Then, the light touched something, and he saw — a figure.

Not a humanoid — a geometric figure. It was a six-sided solid, but not a perfect hexagon. Its length was twice its width. Upon closer examination, he could see there were actually two shapes side by side. The one on his left was a full hexagon, consisting of dark rock with a protrusion in the center. The area on the right was covered with lighter material. He picked at it with a scalpel. Grains of regolith floated away in chunks.

Pierre scraped along the edge of the hexagon, continuing downward until he hit the bottom edge where it met the surrounding wall. He found a groove running along the perimeter. The lip of rock was holding the hexagonal slab against the wall on four sides, while the packed soil was keeping it in place from the other two.

Pierre scraped at the dirt. When most of it was cleared, he drove an anchor into the wall and grabbed it with one hand while holding the protrusion on the hexagon with the other. He pulled. It jerked and stuck, but it *had* moved. Taking out the pick, he cleaned out more before trying again.

Slowly, the hatch opened.
Inside the cavity were ... stones.
Just stones. Six of them, imbedded in the wall, arranged in a circle with size increasing clockwise.

A set of stones.
"What the hell is this?"
A bed of regolith cradled each of them. Whoever — whatever — had done this had carved out sockets in the cavity, placed the stones in them, and sealed them in place with the mortar-like soil.

Pierre Caillou used a fine pick to pry the orbs free, and gently placed each of them in a sample bag.

IN ALL THE TIME HE HAD KNOWN COMMANDER BHUPAL, PIERRE observed her to respond to anger in one of two ways. She would either shrug her shoulders, or go ballistic. Upon their return to the *Schwitt*, the first thing the geologists did was report what they had done, and why they had done it. Pierre described his discovery at the core of the asteroid, and Diane asked rhetorically whether it had been worth the risk.

Poorima Bhupal shrugged her shoulders.
The geologists gathered in the *Schwitt*'s lab. Their futures were uncertain, but for now, their minds were much too busy pondering other things.

"From the samples I took in that room," Pierre began, "I have confirmed the core is stony-iron. The age of the asteroid is also verified as 2.8 billion years."

"I still don't see how it could be differentiated," Marvin said. "The asteroid's just too small."

Pierre shook his head. There were so many unanswered questions. "Maybe the back-room boys will figure it out when we get home. If not ... the Beehive asteroid will not pass through the inner Solar System for another 137 years."

"I'd like to think we'd have ships capable of visiting it long before then," Diane turned to Pierre. "But at least we've answered one question."

"Do you really believe what you told Nima?" Marvin asked.
In response, Pierre asked the computer to project an image over the table. The hexagonal cavity with its six stones hovered holographically before them.

"The stones were all perfect spheres. When I got them back here, I measured and nussed them." He pointed. "Starting from that one, the smallest, and going clockwise, each subsequent stone weighs exactly twice as much and is double the diameter of the one before."

"A binary sequence," Diane whispered.
Pierre nodded.
"That's it?" Marvin asked. "Just ... stones?"
"Oh, Marvin, of course not 'just stones,'" Diane admonished

Continued on page 103

Bob Pinney was a creative moment of battle in this cover for a calendar of artwork plucked from the pages of Metal Hurlant.



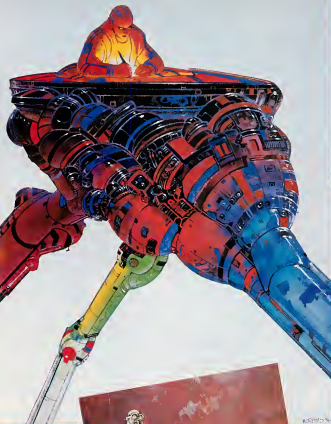
A MOEBIUS TRIP

A somewhat biased look at the double life of a unique graphic artist.

A MOEBIUS STRIP IS A MAGICAL mathematical illusion. First, find a sheet of typing paper and cut off a long narrow strip; what you then hold in your fist is a two-sided band. But give one of the ends a half-twist, paste it to the first end, and what you instead have is a unique twisted loop of paper that in a mathematical paradox, has but one side. Or does it still have two?

Moebius the SF artist is as magical a creation as is the Moebius Strip, the invention of a German mathematician. Yes, creation, because before there was Moebius, there was Jean Giraud, a French artist born in Fontenoy-sous-Bois, near Paris. He was (and still is) one of the world's greatest Western artists. Europe has always had a fascination with the American West, and Giraud contributed to that love of the endless frontier with the creation of *Lieutenant Blueberry*, a character

BY GEOFFREY MANN



LEFT: Moebius' *Iyricism* is a perfect match for Ray Bradbury's poetic vision of the future, in his illustration for *Unbuilt Cities, Unrealized Dreams*. **BELOW:** The cover painting for Gordon R. Dickson's classic novel *Soldier, Ask Not*, abounds that even in the future, there will be war. **RIGHT:** This image from Moebius' portfolio *Futures Magiques* reflects the artist's playful, lighter side.

he dreamed up with writer Jean-Michel Charlier, who was so successful that his adventures have been published for over three decades.

But there was another side to this creator's artistic vision, a more experimental and fantastic side, one that could not be expressed within the constraints of Jean Giraud. And so was born Moebius.

"If there are any rules to being Moebius, it's because I make them, and assume them freely, like in a game," he has written. "There is not a single Moebius style, but many, depending on my state of mind. There are whispering Moebuses, singing Moebuses, solemn ones and laughing ones, even ribald ones. But never mean or angry ones."

To those of us who know them both, Jean Giraud and Moebius, two sides of a very unique creative coin, Giraud represents the consummate craftsman, whereas Moebius is the imaginative manifestation of the unfettered soul that represents the best of science fiction. Of course, Western fans would probably say the opposite, but then, we are SF fans gathered here together today, aren't we? And so it is Moebius' sophisticated take on SF's famous icons that touch our hearts. Perhaps to a certain extent, Moebius/Giraud agrees.

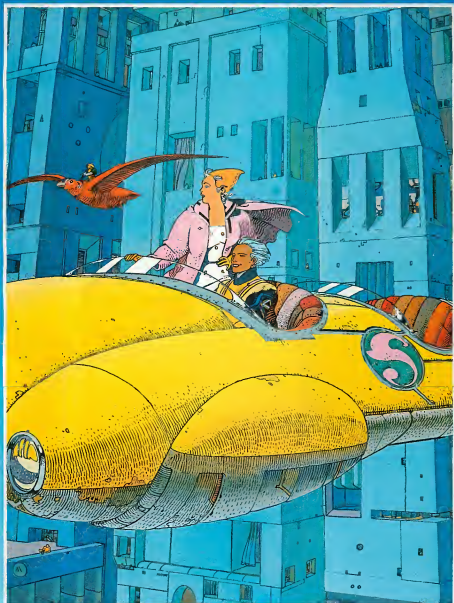
"The style I employ to do *Blueberry* is my most defined," he has written. "Blueberry obeys rules which I cannot break. For example, I cannot draw a red horse, or a seven shooter. Moebius, on the other hand, covers a much larger field. It's everything else: the fantasy, the unexpected, the dream, the delirium. It is a more natural expression of who I truly am."

And who are we to disagree?

Moebius' first graphic stories began appearing in a semi-underground, satirical French magazine by the name of *Hara-Kiri*, where he published black-humored vignettes that were a break from the realistic style for which he had become known. These stories were inspired by the work for such early *Mad* magazine innovators as Will Elder. When it came time to publish these, he chose to appear under the name Moebius, an identity that represented something that could have two sides and yet be one at the same time. It was a new persona for a new style of storytelling.

When *Hara-Kiri* folded, the name Moebius was put to rest for a number of years, while



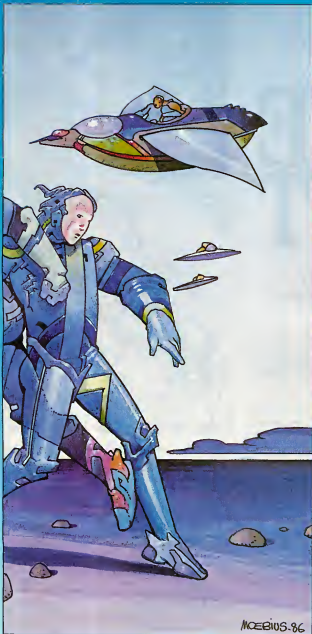




Giraud devoted himself to another dozen books detailing the adventures of his famed *Lieutenant Blueberry*. But Moebius would eventually be back, doing cover art for OPTA, a French SF publishing firm. His illustrations graced the covers for translations of works by such SF stars as Roger Zelazny, Robert Heinlein, A. E. van Vogt, Poul Anderson and others. In 1975, he changed the face of European comics by co-founding the influential *Metal Hurlant* (or "Screaming Metal"), a version of which was later introduced in the United States as *Heavy Metal*. Here is where Moebius published *Arzach* and *The Airtight Garage*, which gave a new artistic vocabulary to the comic book, and inspired a new generation of writers and artists. These stories had the dual result of helping bring comic and SF visual images to the attention of the wider world at large, and of also bringing Moebius himself to the attention of such visionaries as surrealist Alejandro Jodorowsky and SF filmmaker Dan O'Bannon.

Jodorowsky, creator of the cult film classic *El Topo*, drafted Moebius for a very special project. He became one of a team of artists at work on bringing Frank Herbert's *Dune* to the screen. Along with such SF artists as Chris Foss and H. R. Giger, Moebius spent two years attempting to visualize the bizarre desert world of sandworms and *melange*. Jodorowsky was never able to obtain financing to bring his vision of *Dune* to the screen; that job fell to David Lynch, whose controversial





Far left: Moebius was a frequent illustrator of Gordon R. Dickson, as shown by this cover from the French edition of Tactics of Mistake. Right: Robert Silverberg's time travel novel Project Pendulum gave Moebius the opportunity to portray a set of twins projected in opposite directions through the cone.

version of Herbert's creation is still being debated. In an alternate universe somewhere, film fans may be watching Moebius' own interpretation. If only we could join them!

Not all of Moebius' contributions to film are only available for viewing in alternate worlds. Others called upon him, and he helped define a new vocabulary of SF cinema. Director Steven Lisberger tapped him to work on the designs and storyboards for *TRON*, the first movie ever to use a large amount of computer animation. He designed space suits and costumes for Dan O'Bannon's *Alien*. He was a conceptual designer for *The Abyss*, the film written and directed by James Cameron, and worked as well on *Willow*, the live-action fantasy picture produced by George Lucas. He even contributed to the *Masters of the Universe* live-action feature, where he redesigned several "He-Man" concepts. Moebius had a lot to do with what we think about when we think about filmed SF.

Moebius' many critical accolades from his peers include the Shazam Award for Best Foreign Artist given by the our American Academy of Comic Book Arts, two Italian Yellow Kid Awards, two French Alfred Awards, the Belgian Saint-Michel Award and the Inkpot Award given at the San Diego Comic Book Convention. But the most impressive decoration of them all was that given him by French President Francois Mitterand, when he was made "Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres," which is the highest French decoration for cultural and artistic achievement. Perhaps after we survive the coming presidential elections in our country, we too will have a president who might so recognize a genre artist. Maybe it takes a more-open minded president. Or maybe it only takes an artist as unique and supremely talented as Moebius.

For Moebius has transcended the genre of SF, with credits that include not only SF films, and book and magazine covers, but also record album covers (for the likes of Jimi Hendrix), mainstream magazine covers (such as *Glamour*), and advertising campaigns for many prestigious clients (including Citroen and Greenpeace). A postage stamp honoring him and featuring one of his designs was even issued by the French government in 1988! But one of the attributes that makes him special is that he has transcended SF without leaving SF behind. He will be forever ours. As infinite as a Moebius Strip. □

We'd all like a second chance, but for some,
that might be one too many.

LIFE EDIT

BY DAMON KNIGHT

Illustration by Michael Dubisch

MAUREEN APPLEFORTH OPENED THE door, saw that the little conference room was empty, walked in, and let the door close behind her. She pulled out a chair and sat down. One day away from her twenty-ninth birthday, Maureen Appleforth had reddish brown hair with a natural wave, and she was neither too plump nor too thin, but just right.

After a moment the door opened and a young man came in with a machine under his arm. He had sleek brown hair and looked like the kind of man who smoked a pipe. He saw Maureen and looked surprised. "Ms. Appleforth? I was just going to set up the life editor. I'm Brian Orr."

He offered his free hand and she took it for a moment with her cool fingers. "I'm a little early," she said.

"That's all right. Better early than never." He laughed briefly and set the machine down on the table. Then he uncoiled a thick cable and plugged it into an outlet. "Would you sit over here please, Ms. Appleforth? We won't start until you're ready, but I just want to do some calibrations first." He pulled two leads out of the machine and showed her the cuffs at the ends of them. "OK to put these on you?"

She said, "Will it hurt?"

"No, not a bit. Take off your watch, please." He wrapped the cuffs around her wrists; the cuffs were soft but a little tight. He tapped keys on the pad in front of him and looked at the screen. "You're a bit nervous," he said. "Is this a voluntary decision on your part?"

"Not entirely. They told me I couldn't go any higher in the company unless ..."

"But you don't want to do it?"

"No."



"But you want to stay in the company. Go higher."

"Yes."

"So it's a dilemma, isn't it?"

"Yes." She smiled. "That's the kind of thing I tell people."

"You're in conflict resolution upstairs? Or counseling?"

"Conflict."

"And you're good at it. Or they wouldn't care if you went higher or not." His voice was pleasant, and she was feeling a little more relaxed.

"So let's just talk," he said. "Is there anything I can tell you?"

She looked at him. He was projecting honest concern and impartiality. She said, "Why did you take the treatment? If you did, and if you remember."

"Oh, I remember, all right. It was something I said to a girlfriend of mine, years ago. I don't remember what it was, but it used to bother me about once a week. I'd sit and think, 'Jesus, I wish I hadn't said that to her.'"

"And now you don't remember."

"No, because it never happened."

"But you can remember remembering?"

"That's the way it works."



"What if I don't have anything like that? Anything that bothers me when I remember it?"

"You may be surprised. Everybody has something. All the way from horrible crimes to egg on your face."

"I don't. I've had a very tranquil life."

"Happy childhood?"

"Oh, yes. My father — my biological father —"

"Yes?"

"He left us when I was a year old, but he looked me up when I was grown, and we have dinner every now and then. He's very nice, a very gentle man. He's very fond of me, in fact. So even that — it's just —" He waited.

"Why do I have these headaches?" she said.

"He looked down at his keypad. "Been to a doctor?"

"Many doctors. All the tests."

"Well, then that's another good reason, isn't it? Really, I don't see how you can lose. Either you'll find something to change, like everybody else, or you won't. And if you don't, that's even better, don't you think?"

She hesitated. "When you edit your life —"

"Yes?"

"Doesn't that make everything different? Not just for you, for other people?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Suppose, for instance, you had a lover, a woman, and it was a bad relationship. Now you go back and edit her out of your life, right?"

"Yes." He looked uncomfortable.

"So, after you do that, just suppose she finds somebody else and they have a child. That child wouldn't have existed before. Or suppose you kill somebody, and you wish you hadn't. So you edit that, make it come out differently. So now the dead person is alive, but is she real, or just — some kind of ghost?"

"As far as I'm concerned, she's real. You know, what they tell us in training is, you're not creating anything. You're just moving from one time line to another. Where you didn't say anything dumb to your girlfriend, didn't get drunk and fall down the stairs, whatever. So, in this new time line, naturally you meet people that weren't in the old one. They're just as real as you are. Whatever that means."

After a moment, looking at the machine, he remarked, "Your pulse rate has been holding pretty steady. This isn't an emotional thing with you, is it?"

"No. And I'm going to do it. Yes. I am. What do I do?"

"Just relax and remember. Start with things that happened today, then further back, further back. You'll know when you hit something you need to change, even if it's buried deep there."

The machine began to hum and the room darkened gradually, as if transparent dark petals were closing around her. She closed her eyes, and it was like falling into a well of shadows. Bright images swam up and

receded, but there was nothing to edit or change; it was all moonlight and shadows, right back to her first birthday. The day when her drunken father picked her up by the ankles. And swung her. Against the cold dark.

And there was nothing to edit there, either. Somebody else, her father probably, had already edited that moment, or she wouldn't be here, wandering like a cool ghost through the life that was so important to other people.

Orr was bending over her. "Ms. Appleforth?" She opened her eyes. "Are you all right?"

"I have an awful headache," she said.

"That happens sometimes." He sat down again.

She took the cuffs off, rose and opened the door. "Aside from that, I'm fine," she said over her shoulder. "You're fine too, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's just fine. Isn't it?"

Orr looked up at her anxiously. "Ms. Appleforth, are you sure you're all right?"

"Oh, yes. Or if not —" As the door closed, her voice drifted back, "— does it matter?" □

Jaromir Stavan was a believer in science and reason.
Which was a good thing, because both would be needed
to survive his glimpse of —

THE FACE OF GOD

BY DAVID IRA CLEARY

Illustration by Michael Gibbs

SCIENCE IS DISTINGUISHED FROM THE OTHER ARTS not, as Brexxel claims, by "a hardness of focus" but rather by the rule of *repeatability*; we view as scientific those observations that can be confirmed or reproduced. It was with this axiom in mind that I applied for a grant from the University of Wenclaseo, intending to investigate the Chronic Savages of the Northern Esker, that curious race Monlj describes in his *Des Profundis*, whom despite their indolence have been endowed by Nature with an impressive array of time-keeping devices: bony sagittal crests used as

sundials, golden irises that dilate precisely on the hour, toenails that break off at monthly intervals. Monlj even reports that the resting heart rate of healthy pre-pubescents is sixty beats per minute.

I was denied the grant. Apparently the Natural Philosophy department at the university now judges its applicants by another axiom: The phenomenon must be novel. Repeatability is not only unnecessary, it should be avoided altogether. Perhaps sensationalism and muddled thinking are fashionable now, too, and the university would have me write in the style of my less distinguished colleagues. Perhaps jaundiced journalists and failed seminarans now comprise the Board of Dispersations. Perhaps our long-awaited Age of Science is stillborn. Perhaps . . .

Heavy of spirit, I wended my way through Wenclaseo's Sundries Market, the belltower of the university's Pedological Hall visible beyond the red-brick facades of the commercial district, my right arm weighted down by a bag containing a four-meter length of surgeon's sausage, three kilos of bitterness, and the day-old rump of a hirsute pig. As a frugal measure, I had dismissed my housekeeper the week before.

Now, for the first time since my student days, I was doing the marketing myself. How soon, I wondered, before my financial straits forced me to give lectures at good wives' ice cream socials?

"— ecumenical ecstasy, sir!"

"Lungs of liberty! The breath of angels!"

"Visions of the possible, ancient cities and perfect lovers!"

I was in the Aisle of the Gas Vendors, which I had judged the most



direct route between the precinct of the market devoted to meat and the one devoted to vegetables. Perhaps, though, it was not the most fortuitous. The stench of ozone and chloroform, sulphur and nitrous oxide, combined to give me a splitting headache; the cries of the vendors behind their pressure tanks were likewise aggravating, and slumped beneath a parasol was a young woman in a black hoopless dress, perhaps sleeping, perhaps dead, but clearly a caveat to those considering the inhalation of the vendors' poisoned airs. I was near the end of the aisle, my attention drawn to a clutched of yams drooping from a yardpole not five meters farther, when I heard my name called.

"Staván! Joromir Staván, Ph D?"

I turned. The caller was a woman standing behind a great glass bell jar. Rubber balloons — birds and bats and giant fruit flies — were suspended in the air around him, tethered to tent pegs stuck into the ground. The vendor himself was well dressed but repulsive in appearance: His nose was bulbous and pock-marked, his heavy jaws rested like extra collars upon his clavicles, and while his gray beard was full, the hair upon his hatless head was sparse, the bare areas of his scalp stained green. I would have ignored him except his decrepitude seemed significant, even ominous.

"Staván, you remember me?" he said, when I reached his jar. Sadly I did. Phillip Ramos Moreno, Wenclaseo class of '47, a year my senior by the calendar but two decades by appearance. I had not seen him since he sailed toward Pandemonium, the Isle of the Anarchists, intent on distributing a haploid fungus to the islanders that would (so he claimed) profoundly alter their political mind-sets. Now I reached out to shake his hand. Moreno ignored my friendly gesture, bringing a lock of brown hair and a small jar from his waistcoat pocket. "Staván, is the Deity omniscient?"

"By definition," I said, startled by his question. I was also startled by his subsequent action: He opened the little jar, dipped the lock of hair into it, then held the lock to a bare spot on his temple. Apparently the jar held a paste; the hair adhered to his head.

"Definition? Hmmp, Staván! I'd expect more from a naturalist such as yourself. I'd expect evidence."

"One's views of the Deity are strictly —"

"Shhh," Moreno said, returning the jar to his pocket and taking out a beryl-encrusted comb and a looking glass. He spent a moment combing his newly attached lock of hair, then, satisfied with his appearance, said, "Let's grant that the Deity is omniscient. The question then becomes: What is the mechanism of His omniscience? How does He track the flight of each bird, the blooming of each flower, the microscopic trembling of each atom? Is His eyesight that acute, His hearing so splendid? Or does He attend to His creation by some other means, perhaps via electromagnetic emanations of a wavelength we cannot detect, or perturbations in the universal ether?"

I smelled jasmine, a byproduct, no doubt, of Moreno's cosmetic operation. "Jaagfreid suggested that while God knew the initial state of the universe in every detail, He knew each subsequent state not directly but through the evolution of the model contained within His mind, developing in exact concert with His actual creation."

"Jaagfreid! Exactly!" Moreno leaned over his great bell jar; I could see the fresh patch of paste, which had been colorless, had now turned a pale green. "How would you like to test Jaagfreid's hypothesis?"

"Test it? You are joking, Mr. Moreno. It's not a testable hypothesis. There is no science of the Deity."

"But there could be! Let's create a new science, Staván! Next week I plan to take a journey wherein I test none other than Jaagfreid's hypothesis. I invite you, Staván, to accompany me!"

"Thank you," I said, unnerved by this man whose college eccentricities had been undoubtedly amplified by a lifetime's work with noxious fumes, "but I have to make a living."

"Living? Of course, man, of course! That's why I'll pay you handsomely to document our discoveries!"

I might have laughed then at Moreno's offer, had not a small boy run up to the bell jar, shouting, "Batties! Batties!" as he began to

untie one of the balloons, a Lesser Milk Bat, from its peg. Moreno returned to primping his hair, making no move to scold the boy. A moment later I understood the man's nonchalance — a woman whom I judged by her matron's coiffure and peacock houseskirt to be the boy's mother stepped up beside me, waving a hundred peseta note. "I hope this will pay for Juan's indulgences," she said.

"Undoubtedly it will," said Moreno, taking the note. He did not make change, even after the boy had chosen the balloons he wanted, five of them, all bats.

"Children have a peculiar fascination for the little flying mammals," Moreno explained, when his customers had gone.

"Indeed," I said. I hadn't known balloons to be so profitable. "Tell me, Mr. Moreno, more about this journey that we'll be making."

ON A HAZY MORNING SIX DAYS later, we set off in a large balloon from a high meadow fifteen kilometers northeast of Wenclaseo. We rode in a large bamboo carriage, complete with a canvas-walled cabin, and carrying the same glass bell jar Moreno had used in the Sundries Market. Although the carriage seemed sturdy, I had some trepidations. Moreno's balloon was fashioned in the shape of a larger-than-life Simpson's Goose, and strictly speaking consisted of many balloons, for each part — the head, the abdomen, the tail, and the wings — was a buoyant vessel in itself, fed from the bell jar by its own supply line. I would have been more comfortable with a balloon of proven design. Furthermore, I would have preferred a plan more sensible than that which Moreno had confided to me.

To test Jaagfreid's hypothesis, we needed to float eastward over the Sunrise Ocean, past the Logic Group and the Isle of Pandemonium, then over the Death Crest or Waterwall, that thousand-kilometer aquatic anomaly that Moni describes as "a monstrous tidal wave which neither proceeds nor recedes but only destroys." Finally past the Waterwall we would see the evidence Moreno believed would vindicate Jaagfreid: In the features of the Unmapped Continent we would see the Deity's face; one postulated range of peaks would form His nose, a second range would form His craggy eyebrows; below that second range and separated by the first would be two great glacial fields, elliptical and two hundred kilometers along the greater axis, which would form His eyes. The Waterwall itself would prove to be His mouth.

If the Unmapped Continent proved to be the Deity's face, the world would prove to be His head, and it would follow that His thoughts would be expressed in the rumblings and magnetic fluxes of the Earth's interior. Presumably those thoughts would correspond *exactly* to events in the external world.

Or so ran Moreno's chain of logic, a chain charming, yet so specious that it surely would break at the slightest disturbance. I did not bother disturbing it with analysis. Instead, I contented myself with the idea of observing the Unmapped Continent from the air. I'd brought my box camera, some surveying tools, and a folder of the heavy quadrilled paper cartographers use. The Continent would not remain long unmapped.

"Relax, Staván," Moreno said. I smelled jasmine, noticed that my knuckles, which gripped the second-highest bamboo rail as if we were in imminent danger of crashing into the Waterwall, were a bloodless white. "There's no man more skilled than I at aerial piloting."

"Of course not," I said, loosening my grip with an exaggerated slowness. "I've no doubt of your talents. It's your paste I'm afraid of. Isn't there a possibility that its fumes might react with the gas in the balloon?"

Moreno laughed, even as he patted a lock of hair that he had just

pasted to the top of his head. "But the gas is helium. Don't you know that it's inert?"

FOR FIVE DAYS WE PROGRESSED EASTWARD AT ALTITUDES BETWEEN 4,000 and 4,500 meters above sea level, Moreno venting gas from the goose or adding it as necessary, lifting the balloon or lowering it so that the craft would catch the air currents most efficiently. He was an able pilot, indeed, and a studied one, his decisions regarding course adjustments sometimes inspired by variations in windspeeds or barometric readings but more often motivated by meticulous planning — he'd compiled a chart of the airstreams as detailed as any descan's roadmap, and with his sextant and pocketwatch tracked our latitude and longitude to an accuracy within meters. Thus I developed a sense of confidence that we would survive our journey. This sense was sharpened when he explained to me the function of the sausage-shaped ball tanks he kept beneath his control box, which I had taken to be spare helium containers. "There's oxygen in there, Stavan. I'm going to take us up to 7,000 as we approach the Waterwall, and our lungs may need a little help."

But on the morning of the sixth day, I awoke in the cabin in a sweat, hearing an intermittent knocking sound. For a minute or two I wondered if my sweating indicated I was ill, fever just broken, and the knocking the fibrillations of my heart. Then I realized the knocking was external to the cabin, and the heat not a malfunction of my body's thermostat but rather a stream of warm air wafting through a porthole in the canvas. Alarmed, I pulled on my trousers over my nightshirt. The air is seldom warm at four kilometers.

I rushed from the cabin. The morning sun was brilliant, but there were none of the glittering reflections off the ocean I'd come to associate with dawn. I saw why. We were above a land mass, probably an island. A ridge dark with junipers and spiny sequoias jutted up ahead of us.

"Stavan, just in time!" Moreno shouted, pushing four or five bat-balloons at me. A cube of dark blue cheese depended from each bat's rubber hindclaws. "Throw them out one at a time, hard as you can, so the strings don't entangle." He demonstrated, hurling a balloon with such force that our craft shook. The cheese was heavy, the bat only partially inflated; the balloon arched for some twenty or thirty meters before its buoyancy counteracted the throw. I looked around the cabin and saw a score at least of other balloons, descending toward land.

"Are you getting rid of ballast?" I said. The ridge loomed ahead. "Are we sinking?"

"No! Throw! It's Pandemonium!"



THE ISLE OF THE ANARCHISTS. The ridge neared, but I saw we would miss it with meters to spare. As we flew past it, I tossed out one balloon. Then I examined the cheese another held. It smelled sweet, like a bodega or a merry-spore, but I didn't doubt that it had been inoculated with the haploid fungus that Moreno had used for his psycho-logical experiments years before.

"Ah, beautiful." There was the knocking sound again. I turned and saw Moreno was inflating bats with

a mechanical compressor attached to the bell jar. He glared at me. "No, not you! You keep throwing! I'm talking about down there!"

I threw out another bat, looked over the rail. A city spread beneath us, streets a perfect grid extending from the low hills adjacent to the ridge down to a wharf perhaps three kilometers distant. The buildings were all two stories tall, identical in style, and coated with the gray cement islanders make from the fossil shells of trilobites. At regularly spaced intervals were dreary treeless parks. I had never seen a cityscape so monotonous.

"Anarchists no longer, eh Stavan?"

"This is your doing?" I said. Without enthusiasm I pushed out another balloon. "What new system will this cheese impose?"

"New? Stavan, you toy with me. This is but a booster-shot!"

"The place needs to be renamed then," I remarked, shivering despite the warm air. We were above one park now, and I could see a score of the former anarchists exercising on the hard saligness: bending, stretching, moving their limbs in perfectly orchestrated patterns. Like convicts their heads were shaved and their bodies clothed in sleek, gray narrowskin. They noticed us as a body, directing their faces skyward with a grace that seemed to incorporate their recognition of our presence into their routine. It was only after we were past the park that I saw one of their number leave the group, springing southward.

"Order and regularity, Stavan! There's no finer prescription." As if to demonstrate his commitment to his maxim, Moreno had put down the compressor and was now pasting a lock of hair to a bare spot above his right ear. The new lock balanced one above his left ear he'd added the night before. "The Deity welcomes order; it makes His cogitations easier!"

"I'm sure the Deity's thinking apparatus works just as well no matter the state of the universe."

"Throw, Stavan — we can argue later."

I pushed out one bat, and a second; but then we were above another park, and I hesitated. It seemed as if the same group of anarchists were exercising here, and I was reminded of Gastre's tale of a barrister condemned to relive the same horrific trial indefinitely. This ominous association was invalidated soon enough: The anarchists seemed not to notice us at all, and no one broke away from the group. Reassured, I threw my final bat. A minute later we neared a third park. "Look, Stavan. They remember me. They do me honor. I think I'll take us down!"

I glanced at Moreno, who'd stood up and was moving toward the control box, then I looked down at the park. This group of anarchists indeed seemed to remember Moreno or, at the very least, seemed to honor us with an interest more demonstrable than that of their fellow exercisers. They were saluting us as we passed them, left arms raised, right arms —

"Take cover!" I shouted, just as a series of popping sounds commenced. The noises seemed harmless, like those of a child's blasting caps, but an instant later the bamboo railing shattered beside me and I saw Moreno fall to the floor, much too quickly. The islander's salute had been of the ballistic variety. I lay curled in a ball for several moments, anticipating another volley, but none came. Probably their muskets were of the primitive kind, requiring minutes to reload.

"Stavan, get up and help!"

Moreno was shaking me. Blood streamed down his face, flecked with green where it had washed away the paste. Standing up, I felt lightheaded; I thought it was shock at Moreno's condition but then felt a sharp pain in my arm. Moreno waved a four-inch bamboo splinter he had just pulled from my bicep. Half its length was bright with blood. "Superficial, Stavan. Help me now!"

I understood his concern. The goose's great tail was nearly deflated, drooping from the body so that its painted feathers brushed against the railing. A rough hole near the center of the tail was matched by a much neater hole in the decking. The hole could not have been placed more optimally. It had apparently caused us to jet away from the island at high speed. Pandemonium was now at least a kilometer behind us.

But we were scant meters above the waves. "The valve's broken," Moreno explained; and a minute later he was standing on my shoulders, applying the hot flame of an acetylene torch to a crack in the pipe feeding the tail. My wounded arm, still bleeding, ached tremendously; but I am a strong man. I was worried more about the sparks floating down from the torch, landing on the bamboo deck and sometimes close to the tubes of oxygen. And I worried as well about the Waterwall, which I couldn't see now, but knew to be not far over the horizon. Surely we would

now return to Wencleaso. This wounded goose could not rise seven kilometers.

"Of course it can!" Moreno said when I'd voiced my fears. "Of course it will!" And then, pipe welded closed, helium distributed to the other components of the goose, we began to rise.

IN THE CABIN I CLEANSSED AND BANDAGED MY WOUND. IT WAS, AS Moreno had surmised, superficial, the splinter having shallowly pierced my bicep like the errant stitch of a distracted seamstress. Next I dressed, then, having made a sandwich consisting of a half-kilo of surgeon's sausage on a piece of currant bread, went outside to take my breakfast.

Pandemonium lay ahead of us, framed perfectly by the half-meter break in the railing. "Moreno — you're taking us back?"

"Shhh," Moreno said. He sat on the deck near his control box, one of his aerographic maps spread out before him. But he was not studying it at the moment. Instead he had set his looking glass atop the place marking our position while he pasted a lock of hair to his scalp. His head had been grazed by one of the anarchist's bullets. Apparently blood was an ideal dissolver of the paste; his head, with the exception of the peseta-sized bandage at his crown, was now mostly bald.

As Moreno fussed with his hair, I arrived at a better formulation of our circumstances. We were not returning to the island. Indeed, we were a good 15 kilometers beyond it now, at 500 meters above the sea. The reason I'd faced the island upon exiting the cabin was that the balloon was slowly rotating.

The reason the balloon was rotating was that the goose had a leak in its neck. Perhaps a small-caliber bullet had found it. The long neck was narrower, and the goose's head had listed to left.

I went past Moreno to the other side of the carriage and saw the Waterwall for the first time.

It was not impressive, a mere white line on the horizon, but I knew we were still 200 kilometers away from it, and that the white line, from here a delicate stroke on the Delty's enormous esel, was in fact the churning Death Crest that had drowned a hundred sailors.

"This is madness," I said to Moreno. "Your balloon is stricken. We won't get past that thing."

"Nonsense," Moreno said. "My goose has failsafe upon failsafe. Now, shhhh!"

BY EARLY AFTERNOON WE WERE nearing the Waterwall. It stretched from north to south, an abrupt terminus to the Sunrise Ocean. However, even at ten kilometers' distance it looked less than dangerous. Its brilliant white surface seemed more a facade of clouds than a wall of surf. Even the depression in the sea-surface adjacent to it seemed a gentle groove rather than a valley of destruction. It was only when Moreno pointed out that the flotsam being carried down into the groove (which seemed to me to be moving with all the urgency of a burgher's vacation yacht) was moving at 80 kilometers per hour that the Waterwall regained some of its ominous associations.

I saw we were about level with its top. "It looks like we might hit it." "Nonsense, Stavan," Moreno said. He was at the control box, adjusting valves as he scrutinized a map. "Presently we'll encounter an uplift."

"An uplift? How do you know? I thought no one had sailed a balloon this close."

"None has. I predict an uplift, given what I know. Like you, Stavan, I'm a man of science."

"I don't think —" I began, but even as I spoke, I saw that we were

rising rapidly, the goose's head lifted proudly upon its withered neck, the dial on Moreno's altimeter advancing many degrees each second. Our rise was silent, the column of air in which we rose hotter than even the island air of the morning. By the time our ascent slowed, we were at more than 2,400 meters. I was not satisfied. "You spoke before of 7,000 meters."

"Look! Beyond the Waterwall!"

I glimpsed a purple landmass on the horizon, capped by a layer of cloud.

"His cheeks! His nose! The great whiskers that grace his upper lip!" "It's the Unmapped Continent, yes, but —"

There was a shriek. I looked to see if the goose had begun leaking in some vital place. It had not, and the ferocity of the shriek (and its duration) informed me of its nature. It was the Waterwall. It looked like an anvil now, thicker at the base, tapering toward the top. We were a thousand meters away from it, and accelerating. It was sucking us in.

I turned toward the control box.

Moreno was gone.

I shouted his name. Although the shriek had modulated to a roar, the wind had intensified, and it occurred to me that it may have swept Moreno overboard. I struggled against it as I moved past the control box to the other side of the carriage. Gripping the bamboo railing, the goose's loosely feathered tail flapping violently beside me, I studied the water below us. I saw no dark speck against the bright blue surface.

"Stavan, help me!"

Moreno had just emerged from the cabin, his hair whipped into a wild halo. He was dragging the case in which I stored my box camera and cartographer's equipment. "Unlock it!" He indicated the key-hole. "We're missing a —"

A burst of wind knocked him against the cabin. I fought my way to him. "We need altitude, Moreno!"

"We need photogravures."

"But the wind —"

"Let a breeze impede you, Stavan? Are you a naturalist or a nitwit?"

I bit back a sarcastic reply. The wind had pinned him, spread-eagled, to the cabin. My case was sliding across the deck, but I moved to the control box, crawling now — I didn't want to duplicate Moreno's predicament. Clenching a bamboo strut in the deck, I made my decision. The goose's neck, though damaged, would inflate given a proper supply of helium. The added lift would take us free of the Waterwall. With my free hand I reached for the valve in the control box that —

A propulsive stream of air upended me.

I believe I screamed; I was no longer anchored to the deck, but instead clutching the valve which controlled the inflation of the neck; my side was pressed against the sharp edges of the control box while my feet lofted freely; and below me, between the bamboo planks, I saw the apex of the Waterwall.

I saw violent eddies.

I saw vicious riptides.

I saw energies greater than those of all mankind's engines.

But we were not falling. Indeed, we were ascending, and rapidly, rising on an updraft as hot as one vented from a baker's chimney. As I watched, still upended, the storms within the Waterwall grew indistinct, first losing the sprocketed details of their flumoxes and squalls, then seemingly converging, feinting with one another before they merged. Soon I could see the ocean on either side of the Waterwall, and not long afterward the anomaly was a mere finger-width of white, set within a handbreadth of blue.

About then I fell to the deck, landing on my wounded shoulder.

"Stavan!"

Moreno pulled me to a sitting position. Both my head and shoulder ached profoundly; my pulse was alarmingly rapid. Moreno, too, looked unwell, face gray and lips tinged blue. "We're flying very fast, aren't we?" I said. The sky had darkened to the blue of twilight; perhaps, I thought then, an effect of our great velocity. I grabbed something on the control box and lifted myself to my feet. Black spots

appeared on my vision (a sad gloss to Moreno's ugly face), but I made it to the edge of the carriage.

"Stavan! We're at more than 12,000 meters! We need oxygen!"

"We need repeatability," I said. The Waterwall was a pencil-mark beneath us, the Unmapped Continent beyond it a brown mass, mottled with green and white, stretching beyond the gently curved horizon. There were at least two shadow-lined mountain ranges. There was a shiny disk that may have been a glacier. But even these structures were not arranged in a way suggesting a great face.

We were not looking at the Deity.

We had not vindicated Jaggreid.

I slumped over the rail, racing heart heavy. I had never felt so disappointed.

"Stavan! What have you done to my air?"

I turned, groggily. Moreno was holding a rubber tube he'd attached to one of the sausage-shaped black tanks. "You thief!" he shouted. "The oxygen's all gone!"

"I haven't touched it," I said, though with little interest. For high above the goose's right wing there was a dark mass, like an inkblot on the sky or the photographic negative of a cloud, and I saw that we were moving toward it.

WE PASSED INTO THE DARKNESS. THE THIN AIR WAS WARM AND MOIST, a temperate contrast to the chill of the twilight region outside. I say "outside" because I developed the sense that we had entered a great structure, perhaps a cavern but more likely a cathedral. I glimpsed soaring forms kilometers above I took to be stone arches, and the indigo shade of our entryway seemed an enormous stained-glass window; but I believe the sense was prompted more by the fact that we'd disproven Jaggreid's hypothesis. Tranquility can come of disappointment. I concluded this serene structure had been constructed in honor of our mission.

"Stavan! Moreno shouted. "What have you done with the light?"

Moreno, obviously, shared none of my serenity. I squatted beside him and began explaining about the cathedral. He cut me short. "You're daft, man! It's dark because we're going blind! We're blind because you've vented away our oxygen!"

"But the window," I said, but we were far enough from the opening that it now seemed a navy smudge no larger than Dr. Pumarosa's face on the pseta. It was dark enough that I could see neither Moreno nor the arches. "We must be in the cathedral's narthex," I said a minute later. "A passageway extremely long in proportion to —"

"Shhh!" I smelled no jasmine, heard the squeaking not of a jar being unsealed but of a valve being opened. And there: "You monster! You drained the second tube!"

"I did not," I said, then I stood. We'd been progressing at the level, but now, it seemed, we were descending; and for the first time I wondered if Moreno's, and not my own, assessment of our situation was correct.

For we were rushing toward a white light of brilliant intensity, and I remembered Orestes' monograph on the pyrotechnics seen by the dying as their visual cortexes decay.

WE EMERGED INTO THE LIGHT. MY PULSE SLOWED, AS DID THE RATE of my breathing; and the uncritical serenity I'd been experiencing moments before was replaced by a mind-set of cool skepticism. Clearly, I had been suffering from oxygen deprivation as we traveled through the dark place. Just as clearly, the dark place had been no cathedral. But what had it been? And what peculiarity of the upper atmosphere would allow for the rich concentration of oxygen that had revived my thinking apparatus?

The dark place was behind and above us, an oval-shaped egress at least a kilometer long. From this perspective it seemed an entrance to a cavern, a hole chiseled into a great overhang of marble or milky quartz. The overhang itself jutted from a vast cliff face, a wall of the same stone many kilometers high, having a deep gorge or valley carved — as if to spite the laws of gravity — horizontally across it.

The cliff rose from a ruddy wasteland, a level surface devoid of

life and covered — I presumed — with a sand containing some iron compound.

"Sky, now, Stavan — but where's the Sun?"

I looked up with Moreno. The sky was uniformly bright but nowhere could be seen the familiar flame of our nearest star. "Directly above the overhang," I said; Moreno hissed in response — no huge shadow graced the sand below.

I saw that my case was wedged between two rails in the carriage wall. "I'll take some photographs."

"You do that," Moreno said. "I don't understand why you vented the oxygen but I'll expect to see some work out of you now in compensation."

I nodded, saying nothing to defend myself. Delusions once formed are not easily dispelled. With some difficulty, I pulled the case out from where it had been lodged. Then I carried it back into the cabin. Sitting on my bunk, I unlocked the case and opened it. I had only finished oiling the camera's metal iris before Moreno started shouting for me.

"Put your equipment away!" he cried out as I joined him. "This horror doesn't need to be recorded!"

"Horror?"

We were far enough from the cliff face that I could understand its true nature. It was a face in the most literal sense of the word: a handsome face with an aquiline nose, high cheekbones, a noble forehead, and eyes having sharp concavities carved within their centers to suggest pupils. The valley I earlier described was the rift between its generous lips; our egress had been its left nostril.

For it was no mere face, no sky-suspended bas-relief; it was a head, resting neckless on the sand, surveying the endless wasteland.

"We seem to have verified Jaggreid's hypothesis in a surprising way," I said. "We are — or were — the Deity's thoughts, apparently."

"No! Don't you see, Stavan? It's a woman!"

"I don't see what the sex —"

"We need altitude!" Moreno began opening valves frenetically. "There must be more than this!"

I BELIEVE MY PATIENCE WITH MORENO HAD BEEN admirable. I had let him insult me. I had humored him as he postulated one untenable theory after another. I had even indulged him as we began our ascent above the wasteland, despite the sense of doom I had watching the head dwindle beneath us.

But when he snatched my camera I finally lost my temper.

I had stationed my tripod beneath the goose's neck, lashing one leg to the railing and the other two to the deck, and was sliding a photographic plate into the camera box when Moreno came up to me. "No! Not this limb! Not this lie!" At which point he began pounding the camera with one of his oxygen tanks, holding it vertically like a chemist with a pestle. I watched him for a moment, dumbfounded. Wood crunched, brass screws, and glass fragments flew, oil splattered.

Then I shouted something and hit him in the face.

He dropped the tank and slumped against the rail.

"Moreno!" I said, pulling him up by his collar, ready to hit him again if he uttered a single specious syllable. But blood, not words, trickled from his lips; and his half-lidded eyes did not seem to focus upon me. I put my arms around him (the smell of jasmine at close proximity making me light-headed), then dragged him away from the remains of the camera to the place where the anarchists had damaged the railing. There I lashed him to the bamboo framework with one of the cords that had been loosened by the attack. I was careful to bound him tightly enough that he could not escape, yet not so tightly that he would lose circulation in his arms.

When he was secure, I noticed the head beneath us was tiny, no larger than a foolscap seen at a thousand paces, while the red waste-

Continued on page 104

Cybergeneration answers the question of what comes after Cyberpunk.



They've just inherited their parents' cyberpunk future—and they're not happy!
BELOW: One of Cybergeneration's high-tech rebels.

THIS IS NOT YOUR FATHER'S CYBERPUNK," declares one of the many chapter titles in *Cybergeneration: Revolution 2*, R. Talsorian Games' new "post-cyberpunk" role-playing game. *Cybergeneration* is a sequel to Talsorian's popular *Cyberpunk* role-playing game. The action has been moved seven years into the future and the characters are the idealistic children of the original game's hard-bitten *Edgerunners*. The emphasis of the rules is building a character and playing it in a dangerous world, compared to *Cyberpunk*'s concern with simulating high-tech combat. The designers' hope is that players will build a life, not simply maneuver a killing machine.

In creating *Cybergeneration*, the designers at Talsorian addressed a conflict that is as old as role-playing games themselves. Role-playing has always been a structured version of "Let's Pretend." Players take on new personas (characters) and adventure in a fantasy world that is presented to them by a game master. The characters' physical and mental abilities are quantified by the rules and the characters' success or

failure at a task is usually resolved by the roll of dice. This formula means that the players are constantly asking themselves three questions: What would I do in this situation, what would my character do in this situation, and what is the best thing to do according to the rules? Ideally, the players will always do what their characters would do, but in the heat of actual game play, all too often the players instead simply do what is best for them under the rules.

A simple example serves to illustrate the problem of players not "staying in character." A player is running a 16-year-old street kid. The character has been wounded while stealing money and ammunition from a store. The player wants the character to recover her lost Body points (which is how the rules measure damage) and the player knows (because she has read the rules) that the character will get those points back faster if she spends her days doing nothing but resting. The character probably also knows that she will get better faster if she rests, but she doesn't think of it in terms of Body points. Moreover, she is 16 and she just came into a lot (for her) of money. Lying in her flop watching the walls is not going to appeal to her. So to "stay in character" the player will have to let her character have some fun, even if it means healing more slowly.

As the above example hints, most of the problems players find with keeping in character are in some way related to combat. Fighting is where the rules of any role-playing game are the most pervasive, and combat is where the stakes are the highest. Even the best players have trouble treating their characters like people rather than like chess pieces during a firefight. This was particularly true of the original *Cyberpunk*, which had extensive and intricate rules for all forms of combat.

In addition to its detailed combat rules, *Cyberpunk*'s futuristic, high-tech setting also encouraged players to turn their characters into killing machines. In an advanced, industrial society like the *Cyberpunk* background, any character with enough money or enough resourcefulness could buy or steal whatever implement of destruction was wanted. They could modify their own bodies as well, taping up with cybernetics and bio-armor until the final result was more like a character from a shoot-'em-up video game than an actual human being.

Cybergeneration tackles the problem of staying in character right at the roots. First of all, in the seven years that have passed between the games, the tottering United States of America has fallen, only to rise again as the Incorporated States of America. The chaos and violence that marked the earlier background have been greatly reduced, at the cost of a lot of personal freedom. The big





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guns that the Edgerunners of *Cyberpunk* needed just to tickle one another have mostly been seized and melted down. Lethal cybernetics have been outlawed and even peaceful ones have to be registered. Characters simply can't be as dangerous as easily as they could in the previous game.

Second, *Cybergeneration* characters are not the victims of this dark future that the *Cyberpunk* characters were. They are the children of it. The designers of *Cybergeneration* see these children as rebelling against their Edgerunner parents by being less cynical, more committed, more honest, more idealistic, and definitely less violent. In short, the *CyberRevolution*, which the character will probably join, is patterned more on the youth rebellion of the 1960s than on America's original Revolution from the British.

Third, there are no complicated rules of combat to master. The entire section of the rule book dealing with fighting is only five pages long. In contrast, the descriptions of the various character backgrounds take 60 pages. Combat is simple, quick, and usually ends with people unconscious from shock rather than dead from wounds. The mechanics of it can be mastered in minutes, meaning that success in combat (when it occurs) doesn't depend upon knowing the rules better than the game master.

Finally, *Cybergeneration* discourages combat and encourages role-playing with the very way that its rule book is organized and the way in which it has players create their characters.

A typical role-playing game begins with a brief description of the world, then a section on how to generate characters, then a large section on combat and doing things, and then a large section detailing the background. *Cybergeneration* has the brief description of the world, and then bang! On page 10 (before you've even begun to make a character) you are suddenly playing the game. The next 137 pages of the rule book are organized a little like a choose-your-own-ending novel and by the time the players have worked their way through it, they will have picked what their background is, chosen their physical and mental statistics, chosen their skills, bought their equipment, and been assigned their *CyberEvolved* type. Along the way they will have fled Corporate Security at least once, gotten to know one another, experienced the world of the game, and had a chance to decide who their characters are and how they react. All of this before they have read a single word about how to fight.

Having taken away the main toys of *Cyberpunk* (big guns and cybernetics), the designers have replaced them in *Cybergeneration* with the Carbon Plague. The Carbon Plague is a nanotech virus that is always lethal in the 10 percent of the adult population it affects. In the 30 percent of children it affects, however, the virus instead gives them one of five nanite-based powers, transforming the children into the *CyberEvolved*. There are Timmen, who can reshape their limbs; Wizards, who become

living cyberdecks; Alchemists, whose nanites enable them to assemble and disassemble matter; Scanners, who read minds; and Bolters, who become living batteries. Characters in *Cybergeneration* are part of the *CyberEvolved* and thus are targets of the government (which wants to kill them for public health reasons), the corporations (who want to study and use them for their own purposes), and a host of fringe groups from the merely loony to the very deadly. Most likely, the characters will end up as members of the *CyberRevolution*, a loose organization run by a group of legendary Edgerunners whose goals are the overthrow of the government, the smashing of the corporations, the rebirth of personal freedom, a saving of the environment, and the survival of the *CyberEvolved*, not necessarily in that order.

So, *Cybergeneration* has an innovative character-generation method and a terrific emphasis on role-playing. It has a unique premise and a detailed, inventive background. Fine. How does it play?

Well, the most glaring omission from the *Cybergeneration* rule book is an introductory scenario. Granted the first half of the book is playing the game and making the characters, but from there the game master has a lot of suggestions, but very few specifics. I wanted specifics because of something called "Virtuality."

Basically, Virtuality is cyberspace made everyday. For \$100, anyone can buy a dime-sized device that adheres to their temple and allows them to experience with all five senses computer-projected illusions that have been placed all around them. Virtuality is supposed to be the false fronts, the billboards, the graffiti, the art, and the television of the age. Anything that can be imagined can be programmed and projected so that anyone (not just Wizards and Netrunners) can interact with it. If you think that sounds really cool, try describing it to your players. Try particularly when a virtual menace tries to reach out and bite them. The designers are victims of their own imaginations here. Virtuality is a neat idea, but a hard one to game master. Seeing it done in a prepackaged adventure might help.

Overall, the actual mechanics of the game are so simple, there is little to quarrel with. If you want complicated rules, just use the *Cyberpunk* ones. The conversions are few and easy. Still, some things could have had more detail; drugs for instance. Despite the incredible electronic marvels of this world, the available drugs have not been similarly boosted to fit the genre. The stimulants listed, for example, last a shorter time and have vastly worse side effects than the caffeine pills you currently can buy over the counter at your local drugstore.

These reservations aside, *Cybergeneration* is a fast-paced, character-based game with a good background. It was easy to learn, if a little taxing to game master. In all, a worthy child of its darker parent. □

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SCIENCE

Continued from page 38

computers.

SF AGE: How about robots, then? What do we get wrong?

LANDIS: Robots is another area where the Golden Age writers certainly made some wrong guesses. They all assumed that the first robots would be pretty much shaped like humans, with roughly the same size, and would have brains that had human-quality artificial intelligence.

ASARO: As it turns out, human shape isn't the best for many tasks we would want robots to do.

LANDIS: It's amazing how few of them actually even thought of the idea that a computer might be valuable just sitting immobile. And even then, after E.N.I.A.C., the SF writers mostly thought in terms of giant, room-sized computers.

ASARO: On the other hand, the brains of robots in the early SF did anticipate computers. And Damon Knight's "Stranger Station," which came out in 1956, was ahead of its time in its use of an artificial intelligence within a complex computer network. The idea of tiny computers is relatively new in SF. Another pet peeve of mine is the space ship that accelerates from some tiny speed to almost light speed in seconds with no effect on the crew. They ought to be plastered by the acceleration. Another pet peeve: immortality with no side-effects, like overpopulation. I've recently read some stories that do it well, though.

LANDIS: Yes. I've always thought that immortality would be a disaster to progress. Society would ossify.

ASARO: Jean Slonczewski's book, *Dragons of Eyegrim*, gives an insightful look at problems that arise when people live for centuries.

LANDIS: The main reason we have progress at all, I think, is that the old farts standing in the way eventually die.

ASARO: A friend of mine once told me a saying that went something like this: "Our greatest accomplishment is to die." I thought it was rather dark, and I don't know that I agree, but I understand what she meant. Brian Stableford does a good job with the subject in his novella, "Inherit the Earth."

LANDIS: Wil McCarthy discussed some of these issues in *Flies From the Amber*. I thought that he was one of the very few writers to convincingly point out some of the really terrifying consequences of long-lived people running society. David Sedaris did, too, in a short story "Suicidal Tendencies." He pointed out that in a society where everybody was immortal, opportunities for advancement would dwindle away and vanish. The old folks would never get out of the way.

ASARO: In Stableford's "Mortimer Gray's History of Death," a cult of suicide develops among the "emortal" population that seeks ever more bizarre ways to end their lives.

LANDIS: There are some other SF stan-

dards, of course. The planet that's all one climatic zone — all desert; all swamp, all ice.

ASARO: Aliens that look alien but have thought processes and cultures that are essentially twentieth century European or American. There are cultures on Earth that are more alien than some of the aliens in SF.

LANDIS: People that are exposed to radiation having mutant kids with super powers. In real life, about the best you can expect from radiation is a big dose of radiation is cancer.

ASARO: Shapeshifting is another one. It's a great story device, but unrealistic. For the body to change that fast would take far more energy than a normal human can provide in that short of a time. The increase or decrease in mass also has to be accounted for.

LANDIS: Not to mention the question, where does all that mass come from?

ASARO: Can't use E=mc², because the amount of energy required to create even a gram of mass is equal to a small H-bomb. Imagine what would happen to the shapeshifter when its extra mass converted back into energy!

LANDIS: Although the question of, "what does the planet that these shapeshifters in SF all come from look like?" is an interesting one. Shapeshifting would be such a huge evolutionary advantage, surely even the most basic forms of life would have it.

ASARO: But is it really an evolutionary advantage? We do shapeshift, after all, when we age. If we could manage more involved shapeshifts, it would probably take a long time because of the energy requirements.

LANDIS: Shapeshifting trees; shapeshifting grass being grazed on by shapeshifting sheep being preyed on by shapeshifting wolves.

ASARO: Those sheep have to do a lot of grazing before they can shift.

LANDIS: Yes, something's got to power that. Important safety note: never shoot a shapeshifter. They explode.

ASARO: Also, we would have to carry the genetic code for all of those shapes.

ASARO: Hah! Also, beyond the embryonic state, our cells have only a limited ability for growth and differentiation. Those that don't are called cancerous. The changes in shapeshifting also require many chemical bonds to form or break. If an energy change is negative, the shapeshifter has to dump the heat. Odo might get very hot!

LANDIS: It's fun to speculate, but even in the wildest SF, speculation ought to be grounded in the real world we live in. Sometimes a few minutes of thought would show that a story is flat out unbelievable. The pace of science is a real challenge to a SF writer ... but also an opportunity.

ASARO: Although I would like to see more science-oriented SF, I like the fact that the field has such a diversity of approaches. It's an exciting time to be a science fiction writer. So many discoveries are being made at such a fast pace now. Today's science fiction is tomorrow's science fact — or tomorrow's blooper. □

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FROM A STONE

Continued from page 83

gently. "It's information. An ... an artifact of the mind."

"What are they trying to tell us?" Marvin wondered.

Pierre shrugged. "There is no specific message, per se. As Diane said, it's information. Like that early SETI radio message that was beamed to the Hercules Cluster, pictures of DNA and things like that. It just shows an understanding of some fundamental concepts. It shows ... intelligence."

"Intelligence," Marvin repeated. "But there's so much we don't know," Diane said with frustration. "We cut and run just as we start making discoveries. We find some answers, but end up with more questions instead." She clenched her fists. "It's the nature of government secrecy."

"No," Pierre said quietly. "It's the nature of exploration."

The intercom came on. "Three minutes to TEI burn. I'm sure you don't want to miss this."

"Thanks, Ben," Pierre said. "It's my job," Ben replied. "Oh, one more thing. Darmstadt tells us the IAU has officially renamed 2021-PK as asteroid 329780 Beehive."

"Departure. So soon," Diane started for the door. "Aren't you two coming?"

"I am," Marvin got up, but Diane had already left the room. He went as far as the door, and stopped. "Pierre?"

"Yes." "I was sort of thinking ... You know that dream you had?"

Pierre nodded.

"Well, when people encounter something they've never seen before, something totally unknown, there's sometimes a tendency — maybe subconscious, but it's there — a tendency ... to try to relate it to ourselves, to something familiar, something we know about, because we're so desperate to understand it."

"And?"

"I guess what I'm saying is ... are you sure you're not just seeing what you want to see?" He stared at the door.

"Marvin."

He paused.

"I don't think so."

Marvin shrugged, and left the room.

Pierre rested his elbows on the table, his hands cupped under his chin. The ghostly image of the six stones hovered before his eyes: the stones, the binary sequence, the message. He still had no idea who or what the aliens were, but through a common informational choice, a link had been forged between himself and the builders of the Beehive. They proved that all sentient beings, regardless of biology, shared at least one common heritage. Pierre marveled once more at this simple message, transmitted across an unimaginably vast expanse of space and time, from a stone. □

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FACE OF GOD

Continued from page 97

land stretched interminably; and that I could not see the demarcation between it and the sky, that illusory line called horizon.

I went to the control box and turned the valves to take us down.

BY TRIANGULATION I CALCULATED WE HAD been more than fifty kilometers above the head, yet it loomed before us again within twenty minutes. I could not understand this near five-fold; the undamaged portions of the goose seemed sufficiently inflated, and the valves were far from being fully open. I wondered if I'd erred in my calculations.

I inspected the altimeter, to see if it was reporting the same dizzying descension. It was not; its red needle was fluttering between the 4,000 and 4,500 meter marks. I bent closer, searching for obvious damage to the apparatus.

"Stavani"

Moreno was struggling with his bonds. His left cheek was swollen and beginning to bruise; I wondered if I had broken his jaw. He did not, however, seem to view the damage to be an impediment to speech. "Listen to reason, Stavani. The Deity cannot be a woman. Such a notion violates all propriety. It flies — hah — in the face of common sense!" We were about level with the head's great lips; it struck me then that the head was androgenous if anything, neither male nor female, exactly ambiguous enough that Moreno could stamp his own worst interpretation upon it. But I said, "Science is concerned with common sense only, not propriety. And our common sense told us that we came out of this stone object."

"Come out, yes — but go back in, never!" Moreno twisted so that he could see the head behind him; when he looked back at me, his face was wrought with horror, for we had begun moving toward the larger face, as if drawn by a great inhalation. "Stavani! Lift, man! Altitude!" He began kicking; the railing creaked behind him. "The meta-deity! Heads within heads, thoughts within thoughts. We must see the meta-deity!"

"Quiet," I said. We were beneath the overhang, and accelerating. "You're injured. You need to rest."

"Never!" he shouted, and then there was a crack, and Moreno fell from the balloon, along with the length of railing to which he was attached.

Shouting his name, I hurried to the edge of the carriage. He was already far below the goose, a dark speck against the red sand. I resolved to rescue him, or at least retrieve his body. But when I turned toward the control box, I saw a second stone head set upon the wasteland.

It had a full head of hair. Its nose was smooth and finely shaped. It had the strong jawline of a younger man. Yet it was Moreno,

obviously Moreno, massive as a mountain and staring into the distance.

He seemed pleased, look of terror gone.

I was swept into the first head's nostril.

MY RETURN TO WENCLASED WAS EPIC IN TERMS of distance, but prosaic otherwise. I quickly determined that the northex of my delirium was the Deity's nasal passageway, the arches not the buttresses of a cathedral but structures within her left maxillary sinus. Upon emerging from that great cavity, I continued eastward, propelled first by fluxions from the Waterwall below and then by the global airstream. I passed above the Unmapped Continent — now well-mapped, at least the portion I traversed — then flew across the Friendly Sea. Twelve days after Moreno's fall, I set down in a trout-pond within shouting distance of the high field from which we had launched.

Somewhere over the sea I discovered that there was about a centiliter of a clear liquid in each of the oxygen tanks. Subsequent tests have demonstrated that concentrated oxygen reacts with an agent in Moreno's paste, yielding the fluid and a small quantity of heat. Probably the gas was spoiled when Moreno filled the tanks. He should have known that oxygen is not inert.

But I have no other discoveries to relate, merely a set of suggestions indicating the route our new knowledge might take us. If we have indeed verified Jaagfreid's hypothesis, or a variation thereof — if we are literally the mentations of the Deity, a world inside Her head — we may be forced to revise the model of reality that science has constructed over the past two centuries. We will need to reexamine the notion that our Earth revolves around the sun; we will need to account for the stars, which I suggest are not Sun-like bodies at awesome distances but instead foramen within the universal skull. And we will ultimately need to consider the greater questions: What is the nature of the wasteland containing the head? Is it infinite and inert, or in fact the inner life of a meta-deity? And if the latter proves to be the case, what sort of meta-deity could be so perverse as to deify the likes of Moreno?

I am confident that science will accommodate my findings. I am less confident that such an accommodation will happen soon. For though I've received sufficient compensation from Moreno's estate to publish this account on my own, the University of Wenclased refuses to fund a second expedition to the Waterwall. They claim that the public, having read once about a new phenomenon, will not care to read about it again.

I submit that the university is mistaken. Educated readers are not so easily jaded. And educated readers should know — or should at least have the capacity to learn — that repeatability is the heart of science, that an unverified discovery is no better than a fiction. □

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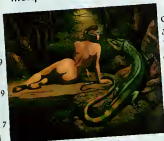


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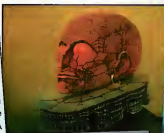
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